



University of Sheffield

The influence of secondary school students' voices and participation in Maltese EkoSkola programs.

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for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Declaration

I, Randall R. Cilia, confirm that this work is authentic and that I am the author of this thesis: *The influence of secondary school students' voices and participation in Maltese EkoSkola programs*.

I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

January 2026

Randall R. Cilia

Abstract

The influence of secondary school students' voices and participation in Maltese EkoSkola programs.

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This research study focused on the extent to which EkoSkola programs give secondary school students opportunities to express their opinions and participate in decision-making. Using Mitra's theory of voice and participation as a framework, the main goals of the research were: to understand how well students' voices within EkoSkola committees are heard; to identify the essential personal qualities needed by EkoSkola committee members to participate in and lead their peers in ESD programs; to evaluate how effectively the strategies used by the EkoSkola committees helped implement the projects; and to analyse the leadership styles employed by heads of schools that encouraged students' voices and participation.

This study involved eleven semi-structured interviews and five focus groups with the heads of schools, link teachers, EkoSkola teachers, and EkoSkola committee members from four Maltese Green Flag secondary schools. Four themes emerged: i) Leadership, focusing on leadership styles adopted by the HOSs to empower EkoSkola committee members to speak up and participate in decision-making; ii) Personal qualities and attributes shared by EkoSkola committee members while implementing their projects; iii) Challenges, barriers, and support (or lack thereof) received by committees during project implementation at their schools; and iv) Promotion and community outreach efforts to encourage the entire school community (including educators, non-teaching staff, and parents) to participate and actively engage in pro-sustainability initiatives.

Several recommendations are offered for policymakers, educators, and everyone involved in supporting students as they implement the EkoSkola programs. These include establishing an official ESD policy in Maltese schools, ensuring that committee members act as decision-makers rather than consultants, scheduling committee meetings at specific times (not during breaks) so students can research and work on the program, and encouraging partnerships between local councils and the EkoSkola committees to promote ESD initiatives within local communities.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife, Marita, my children, Eliza and Luke George, and my family, who have always supported me on this journey to complete this research.

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Table of contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of contents	v
List of figures	ix
List of tables	x
Glossary of terms	xi
List of abbreviations and acronyms	xii
Chapter 1 - Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research aims	1
1.3 My positionality in this research study	2
1.4 Research methods and key findings	3
1.5 Thesis structure	5
Chapter 2 – Literature Review	6
2.1 Introduction	6
2.2 The recognition of children’s rights	7
2.3.1 The history of Environmental Education: key milestones	9
2.3.2 From the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development to the Roadmap for 2030	13
2.4 Education for Sustainable Development	16
2.4.1 Transformation and change.....	17
2.4.2 Education for all and lifelong learning	18
2.4.3 Envisioning a better future	19
2.4.4 Engaging in critical thinking and reflection	20
2.4.5 Partnership with school authorities to actively participate in decision-making	22
2.4.6 Participation in decision-making on a local and international	23

2.4.7 Understanding connections between environmental, social, and economic pillars of sustainability	24
2.5 The origins of Eco-schools and their promotion of ESD programs	24
2.6 EkoSkola and other ESD programs	28
2.7 Students' voice	33
2.8 Research on students' committees	34
2.9 Theories of students' voices.....	38
2.10 Conclusion	45
Chapter 3- Methodology	46
3.1 Introduction	46
3.2 Research paradigm	47
3.3 Research design	49
3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews	49
3.3.2 Focus groups	51
3.3.3 My positionality	53
3.4 Data collection	54
3.4.1 Research context	54
3.4.2 Choosing the participants	55
3.4.3 Data collection	57
3.5 Data analysis	58
3.6 Ethical considerations	65
3.7 Conclusion	67
Chapter 4 Research findings, analysis, and discussion	68
4.1 Introduction	68
4.2 Participant schools' background	68
4.3 Overview of the main themes	70
4.3 Theme 1: Leadership	71
4.3.1 Distributed leadership	71

4.3.2 Decision-making	75
4.3.3 Dialogue	78
4.3.4 Empowerment	83
4.3.5 Student leadership	87
4.3.6 Summary of findings	91
4.4 Theme 2: Personal qualities and attributes of committee members	91
4.4.1 Working in a team	92
4.4.2 Self motivation and perseverance	97
4.4.3 Learning from changes and achievements	98
4.4.4 Summary of findings	103
4.5 Theme 3: Challenges, barriers and support (or lack of) received by committees	103
4.5.1 Lack of time available for committee members to meet	104
4.5.2 Lack of time for HOSs to listen to and meet the committees	106
4.5.3 Lack of financial support and resources for the committees	108
4.5.4 Turnover of link teachers	110
4.5.5 Lack of staff (teaching and non-teaching) support	111
4.5.6 The fear of change	112
4.5.7 Lack of recognition from the Maltese education system	114
4.5.8 A common issue experienced only in state middle schools	117
4.5.9 Summary of findings	118
4.6 Theme 4: Promotion and outreach	119
4.6.1 Choosing and identifying projects and initiatives	119
4.6.2 Doing research	120
4.6.3 Promotion of projects and work	122
4.6.4 Promoting SD practices to the parents and local communities	127
4.6.5 Promotion of hands-on activities and entrepreneurship as part of EkoSkola projects.....	132
4.6.6 Promoting social inclusion	134
4.6.7 Summary of findings	136

4.7 Conclusion	136
Chapter 5: Conclusion	138
5.1 Introduction.....	138
5.2.1 Key empirical findings	138
5.2.2 Research Question 1	139
5.2.3 Research Question 2	142
5.2.4 Research Question 3	144
5.3 Research limitations	146
5.4 Contribution to knowledge	148
5.5 Ideas for further research	150
5.6 Recommendations	150
5.7 Final conclusions	153
References	155
Appendices	
Appendix 1	170
Declaration of Geneva 1923	172
Appendix 2	173
Participation information sheet	174
Participant's consent form	183
Appendix 3	187
Interview question.....	188
Appendix 4	192
Approval from the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the University of Sheffield	193
Appendix 5	194
Excerpts with memos, codings, and thoughts.....	195

List of figures

Fig. 1 Definition of Environmental Education.....	9
Fig. 2 The 17 SDGs	14
Fig. 3 Hart’s ladder of participation	39
Fig. 4 Leadership codings	61
Fig. 5 Personal qualities and attributes of committee members codings	62
Fig. 6 Challenges and barriers codings	63
Fig. 7 Promotion and outreach codings	64

List of tables

Table 1: The five priority action areas as proposed by <i>ESD: A Roadmap for 2030</i> (UNESCO, 2020)	15
Table 2: Summary of UN initiatives pro-EE and ESD	16
Table 3: Participants' information	55
Table 4: Codes and frequencies	59
Table 5: Codes grouped into four main Themes	60
Table 6: Definition of themes	64
Table 7: The four themes with their respective sub-themes	70
Table 8: The main qualities, attributes, skills, and characteristics possessed by the committee members and identified during the interviews and focus groups	91

Glossary of terms

EkoSkola: The Maltese term for the Eco-school program.

EkoSkola teacher: Teachers who support the EkoSkola committees and make the necessary connections between the committees, Nature Trust Malta, and FEE.

EkoSkola committee: A committee that represents students. Composed of students, educators, and non-teaching staff who are interested in discussing and acting on environmental and social issues.

Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE): An international non-governmental organization that coordinates Education for Sustainable Development programs, including Eco-schools.

Link teacher: An educator who is responsible for coordinating communication and collaboration between the EkoSkola committee and the school and external organizations (such as local councils and non-governmental organizations).

Middle school: It is a state secondary school setting within the Maltese education system, catering for students aged between 11 and 13 years old. After attending in-state middle schools for two years, students progress to state secondary schools (facilitating transition from primary to secondary education).

Nature Trust Malta (NTM): A Maltese environmental non-governmental organization involved in environmental education and the local coordination of EkoSkola initiatives.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CCP	Core Competence Program
DESD	Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
FEE	Foundation for Environmental Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFS	Green Flag Schools
HIQA	Health Information and Quality Authority
HOD	Head of department
HOS	Head of school
MYER	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NQT	Newly qualified teacher
PAL	Physical Activity Learning
PD	Professional development
PMPD	Performance Management and Professional Development
PR	Public Relations
SD	Sustainable development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDP	School development plan
SLT	School leadership team
SMART	Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-based
TA	Thematic analysis
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the rights of the child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
WSA	Whole school approach
YRE	Young Reporters for the Environment

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the significance of students' voices and participation in the EkoSkola projects of Maltese secondary schools. Ecoschool programs, known locally as EkoSkola, are global Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiatives that encourage children to express themselves and engage in projects focused on reusing, reducing, and recycling waste, finding effective ways to manage energy use, and advocating for the protection of natural habitats from unsustainable development. These programs also promote social dialogue and support social inclusion and justice. Schools implementing the EkoSkola programs must follow a seven-step framework over a two-year period to earn an internationally recognized Green Flag award.

The study was carried out in three Maltese secondary and one middle School that were EkoSkola Green Flag accredited. The EkoSkola committees involved in this study consisted of students aged 11-16 years. Although many student committees in Maltese secondary and middle schools are typically related to various sports and leisure clubs, the EkoSkola committees are among those that aim to represent the entire student body. In this context, EkoSkola programs can be seen as among the few platforms where children can discuss environmental and social issues affecting them at both the school and community levels.

This study examined how EkoSkola projects helped students find suitable ways to express themselves and participate in decision-making alongside teachers and peers. Although the study involved only three secondary schools and one middle school EkoSkola committees, it identified the main barriers that prevented these committees from implementing their programs and making necessary changes. The study also sought to determine the extent to which initiatives proposed by the EkoSkola committees influenced changes in school and local community cultures, and whether teachers have been convinced to change their teaching methods to support more student-centred learning.

1.2 Research aims

The main aims of this research were:

- I) To understand the extent to which students' voices within EkoSkola committees were being heard.
- II) To investigate whether EkoSkola programs genuinely gave children the opportunity to lead educators, peers, and parents in driving the necessary changes in behaviours and lifestyles that promoted sustainability.
- III) To identify common key personal qualities that EkoSkola committee members had to effectively participate in decision-making and lead their peers in ESD projects.

- IV) To assess the effectiveness and success of the strategies used by EkoSkola committees in implementing EkoSkola projects.
- V) to explore the leadership styles adopted by different SLTs (School leadership teams) and assess whether some leadership styles better empowered and encouraged EkoSkola committees to lead and implement their initiatives.

This research study sought to address three research questions:

RQ1:

To what extent are students' voices within EkoSkola committees being heard and given due importance?

RQ2:

How effective and successful are strategies to empower student voices adopted by EkoSkola committees in implementing EkoSkola programs?

RQ3:

Which leadership styles adopted by heads of schools (HOSs) empower student voices and encourage student leadership?

1.3 My positionality in this research study

As a HOS of a Maltese primary state school, this research has greatly helped me learn and reflect on the role children play in initiating needed change, as well as the opportunities we (educators) provide them to decide which changes are necessary from their perspectives to develop more sustainable lifestyles and build more just communities. It has also enabled me to understand different viewpoints and school realities from colleagues who are heads of schools, like me, as well as educators and students who prioritize environmental conservation and aim to foster a more inclusive society.

From a very young age, I developed a love for the natural environment and heritage. When I studied Biology in secondary school, I enjoyed conducting fieldwork in the countryside and going bird-watching in natural reserves. Although EkoSkola was still in its early stages at the time, and my school was not yet an eco-school, my experience with nature motivated me to pursue post-secondary studies in Science subjects, and I graduated as a Science teacher about twenty years ago. As a science teacher, I always admired the students who served on the EkoSkola committee at the schools where I taught. They showed a great deal of love for their natural environment and were always eager to learn more about it. Most of them consistently encouraged their peers to keep their classrooms clean, and sometimes cleaned the playground themselves. This inspired me to learn more about EkoSkola and its initiatives.

Besides my love for exploring nature and discovering different environments in Malta and abroad, as an educator and a head of school, I enjoy engaging students in discussions and giving them opportunities to express themselves freely about issues that matter to them or

areas they wish to improve. I believe students have much to share in terms of dreams and ideas that could eventually help us solve environmental and social problems in our schools. However, I also feel that various barriers hinder these exchanges. One major obstacle is the limited time available for class discussions, as syllabi are extensive and schedules are packed with lessons across various academic subjects, leaving little room for extracurricular activities, school debates, and projects aimed at promoting climate change awareness.

While completing my dissertation, which was part of the requirements for my Master's Degree in Education (Cilia, 2018), I conducted a case study focusing on the work of four EkoSkola Committees from four primary Maltese schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the four HOSs and the educators who supported these EkoSkola committees, as well as through focus groups with the four committees. This study found that HOSs who adopted a distributed leadership style were more open to suggestions and more involved in committees, particularly when important decisions on pro-SD practices needed to be made. Students were confident discussing their suggestions and recommendations with their heads of school, and changes to the school environment were implemented smoothly, involving all students. Additionally, this study revealed that when important changes were needed to improve or alter the school environment, the EkoSkola committees were encouraged to submit their suggestions and voice their opinions; however, this was not the case when important decisions concerning teaching and learning were made.

A key reason I chose to pursue this doctoral research was to explore whether students are truly empowered by EkoSkola programs and whether these programs offer them opportunities to voice their opinions within their schools and local communities. Additionally, I wanted to understand how sincerely their voices were being heard during the implementation of EkoSkola projects, and what opportunities were created for them to work with educators and SLT (Senior Leadership Team) members to address environmental and social issues at their schools.

As a theoretical framework, this thesis uses Mitra's (2008) three-level theory of children's voice and participation. It describes three progressive stages: starting with a level (Level 1) where children are simply heard by adults (including educators), progressing to collaboration with adults (Level 2), and ultimately becoming leaders who mobilize adults to take action (Level 3). Despite the many theories of children's voices and participation, I found this theory particularly useful for understanding how children can contribute to EkoSkola projects and the level of trust that educators, parents, and local communities place in them to effect necessary changes.

1.4 Research methods and key findings

The primary aims of this study were to understand the extent to which students' voices within EkoSkola committees were being heard and to investigate whether EkoSkola programs can genuinely give children the opportunity to lead educators, peers, and parents in driving the necessary changes in behaviours and lifestyles that promote sustainability. This study focused on the experiences and perspectives of EkoSkola committee members (of four EkoSkola committees) in implementing sustainable development (SD) initiatives and how the heads of

schools, link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers of these four committees viewed committee members' participation in decision-making to bring more SD practices to their school and local communities.

Overall, eleven semi-structured interviews and five focus groups were conducted across three secondary schools and one middle school in Malta. The interviews included HOSs, link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers, while four focus groups were held with the four EkoSkola committees. In one of the participating schools, I also conducted a focus group (instead of individual interviews) with the link teachers supporting that school's EkoSkola committee.

The data collected provided valuable insights into the experiences of all educators involved in EkoSkola, helping me identify the main barriers the EkoSkola committees face when implementing the program at their schools. This research revealed that one of the significant challenges children faced when attempting to participate in decision-making was the numerous obstacles created by rigid hierarchical structures within the education system, which were heavily influenced by politicians, policymakers, and school leaders. Other barriers included limited meeting time, limited support from some educators, insufficient financial resources, and a lack of recognition from the local education system. Despite these challenges, committee members shared certain personal qualities that helped them succeed in their projects and communicate their messages effectively to educators, parents, and peers.

One of the key qualities shared by the committees was a passion for the natural environment, along with perseverance, enthusiasm, creativity, strong communication skills, and effective teamwork. Additionally, all the committees showcased excellent collaboration within their schools and local communities.

This study also examined the role of school leadership in supporting the EkoSkola committees. Leaders' perceptions of the projects and their belief in Sustainable Development greatly influenced whether these initiatives succeeded or remained unfinished. The findings also showed that while a HOS's interest in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programs is crucial for their success, the leadership style they adopted was equally important. Leadership styles that fostered shared leadership empowered students to work on projects they found meaningful, thereby improving the school environment, promoting active leadership, and enabling them to guide their peers, parents, and educators toward common goals.

The recommendations in Chapter 5 urge policymakers, educators, and all stakeholders involved in EkoSkola to recognize the importance of providing children with opportunities to research, discuss, and express their opinions and concerns —issues that affect both their current lives and their futures. For EkoSkola programs to succeed, Green Flag schools should allocate time for EkoSkola committees to prepare, discuss, research, and implement strategies within schools and local communities. The participating committees shared many ideas and strategies they found effective in motivating people to adopt sustainable lifestyles. These committees need adequate time to prepare and carry out projects that promote social inclusion and justice, and protect vulnerable groups such as women, children, LGBTQ+

communities, disabled people, and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds from injustice and discrimination.

1.5 Thesis structure

This thesis is organized into five distinct chapters that demonstrate how addressing the three research questions generates new knowledge about EkoSkola and students' participation in ESD programs.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, reviews the literature on children's rights and ESD, including a historical overview of how EkoSkola projects began internationally and in Malta. It also presents research on students' voices and how various stakeholders, including those at schools and within local communities, perceive children's voices and participation.

Chapter Three discusses the research methodology and explains the philosophical basis for the selected approach. It clarifies why qualitative methods were preferred over quantitative ones, as they give participants a greater voice and enable a better understanding of their experiences and perspectives involved in EkoSkola projects. A detailed description of data collection tools, procedures, and analysis is provided. The chapter also addresses ethical considerations, including measures to ensure confidentiality and to respect participating schools and individuals.

Chapter Four presents findings from eleven interviews and five focus groups. A thematic approach was employed to analyse the data, which was then organized into four main themes. The key findings for each theme were critically analysed, evaluated, and discussed using academic literature.

Chapter Five presents final reflections, revisiting the research questions and discussing how each has been addressed, along with the doctoral project's key findings. This research highlights its contribution to the broader understanding of EkoSkola projects, demonstrating how they provide opportunities for children to voice their opinions and act as agents of change within their schools and local communities. The chapter also discusses research limitations to guide future studies. Additionally, it offers recommendations for educators and policymakers, encouraging them to see EkoSkola as an opportunity rather than a threat to authority or teachers' power.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Understanding the importance of children's voices and participation in education for sustainable development (ESD) programs is a key goal of this research. This study will focus on the opportunities children have to express their ideas, concerns, and perceptions, and on their empowerment to take leadership roles in working with adults to identify social and environmental issues, find suitable solutions, and implement them. The first part of this chapter will review and discuss the literature on children's rights and the policies that support them. This is crucial because listening to children and providing them with opportunities to succeed are not optional; they are a right. Children have the right to express themselves and take action on issues that affect their lives (UNCRC, 1989; Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017). The history of ESD and environmental education (EE) will be thoroughly outlined, demonstrating how ESD and EE programs and initiatives have developed and been implemented over the past thirty years.

During the 1992 Rio conference, governments, diplomats, and NGOs recognized the importance of ESD and the role of schools in preparing children for future environmental and social crises, leading to the development of eco-school programs (Chasek, 2012). These programs aimed to give children opportunities to become empowered and serve as change agents. In this chapter, I will present the findings of academic studies examining children's participation in Eco-school projects worldwide, including those in Malta. This is important because it is essential to understand how schools worldwide have responded to the need for ESD programs in their local communities and whether such programs have led to necessary changes in lifestyles and behaviours that promote sustainable development (SD).

This chapter will also review the literature on children's voices and participation. Children's voices have long been a topic of discussion, especially as it has become clear that children can share their perspectives on various issues, and their opinions and ideas can help identify potential solutions to social and environmental problems. Mitra's (2008) theory of students' voice and participation serves as the primary foundation for this research's theoretical framework. This theory explains how children progress through different levels, starting from level one, where they identify issues and share ideas with adults, to level three, where children assume leadership roles and mobilize adults to become active agents of change.

2.2 The recognition of children's rights

The 20th century marked a major milestone in the recognition of children's rights. The first Declaration of the Rights of the Child was published by the International Save the Children Union in Geneva on February 23, 1923 (Appendix 1) (Moody, 2015). The document included only five statements focused on children's physical and psychological well-being. The first four statements addressed their physiological needs, highlighting the importance of adequate food and shelter, proper medical care when needed, and the responsibility of adults to prevent any form of exploitation when children are in distress. The fifth statement emphasized that children need to develop their talents to make a positive contribution to society. Although there was no direct mention of children's voices or participation, these five statements began to recognize children as valuable individuals with rights and responsibilities. Without rights or recognition, it becomes more difficult for children to empower themselves, express their opinions, and participate in decision-making (O'Brien, 2018).

It was not until 1989 that the UN published the first Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). This Convention outlines the rights of children and requires that they be respected by their parents, caregivers, and the state. Articles 12 and 13 emphasize the importance of children's voices, promoting the creation of national laws that give children the opportunity to express themselves and share their views, ideas, and concerns in legal and administrative processes. Article 12 encourages state parties to allow children to form and express their opinions freely without fear of punishment. This article also suggests that children's opinions be given appropriate weight based on their age and maturity. Additionally, Article 13 highlights the vital role of children's freedom of expression. It urges all stakeholders (educators, caregivers, and policymakers) to provide opportunities for children to seek, receive, and share information through spoken, written, or artistic means, in ways that are comfortable for them.

The Maltese government took its first step toward launching the National Children's Policy in Malta by releasing the Draft National Children's Policy in November 2011 (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2011). This draft policy was created to address various recommendations outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Malta is a signatory and ratifier. Chapter 6 of the document highlights the importance of children's active participation in policymaking and decision-making alongside adults on issues that affect not only their present but also their future. It stresses the importance of informing children about decisions being made and encouraging them to share their views and concerns. There is a strong emphasis on empowering children to feel a sense of belonging within their society, fostering democratic principles, promoting civic responsibility, and ensuring they receive essential education through life skills subjects that enable them to become active members of society.

Chapter 6 of the Draft National Children's Policy (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2011) stresses the importance of children's participation through dialogue and effective communication. It highlights avoiding adult language and providing clear, understandable information to ensure successful communication. The document recognizes

that, despite substantial efforts to give children space and time to participate in decisions and be heard, policies and strategies often overlook children's suggestions. Although it does not offer specific strategies to address this, it suggests that children should collaborate with adults to identify, decide on, and manage projects they are involved in. The document emphasizes that adults should serve as facilitators rather than leaders.

The suggestions and recommendations in this draft, while highlighting children's voices, lack specific steps to ensure their opinions are genuinely valued and considered. According to the Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family (2011), listening to children does not guarantee that their voices are always appreciated, and even when they are, it does not ensure that their suggestions are acted upon.

The first Maltese National Children's Policy was published in 2017 (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017), which was not only quite a long time after the draft was published (six years after), but it was published by another government, and by a different ministry (which was not the Ministry of Education, but the Ministry of Social Policy and Children's Rights). The policy discussed the importance of fostering quality childhood within Maltese communities. According to this policy, quality childhood is based on five key dimensions: i) Home environment, ii) Social well-being, iii) Health and environment, iv) Education and employment, and v) Leisure and culture. The policy emphasizes that without a quality childhood, children struggle to express themselves and participate in decision-making at all levels, including family, school, local, and national levels. It also reflects children's perspectives on all five dimensions and emphasizes the importance of providing children with opportunities to communicate with adults and share their ideas. However, it emphasizes that children's participation and their ability to express themselves depend on feeling safe in their environment.

The policy states that a lack of family support and quality time can harm children's confidence and self-image, even within their immediate environment (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017). In addition, the Children's policy encourages parents to promote constructive communication with their children, and in doing so, they strive to create a space where children develop essential skills to share their ideas and concerns confidently in social settings (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017). Moreover, according to the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights (2017), by fostering an inclusive environment free from violence and aggression, children gain a sense of belonging that encourages them to see their world as valuable enough to contribute to meaningful change. The policy also thoroughly addresses adult-child relationships, emphasizing that clear communication between the two increases the likelihood of children participating in decision-making (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017).

On the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Office of the Commissioner for Children (Malta) published its Annual Report (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2020). This report confirmed that, despite the focus on children's participation, children should not be forced to participate; instead, they should be allowed to choose if and how to participate effectively. Therefore, the commissioner recommended that adults create ideal conditions to ensure children feel safe when making meaningful contributions. The

report also emphasizes the importance of encouraging children to advocate for their rights, highlighting the need for them to gain knowledge, skills, and confidence to understand the major issues affecting their rights and to develop the abilities necessary to identify and address these concerns.

2.3.1 The history of Environmental Education: key milestones

The first definition of environmental education appeared in Stapp et al (1969)'s article in the first issue of the academic journal of *Environmental Education*, which was then renamed *The Journal of Environmental Education* in 1971. Figure 1 presents Stapp et al.'s (1969) definition of EE.

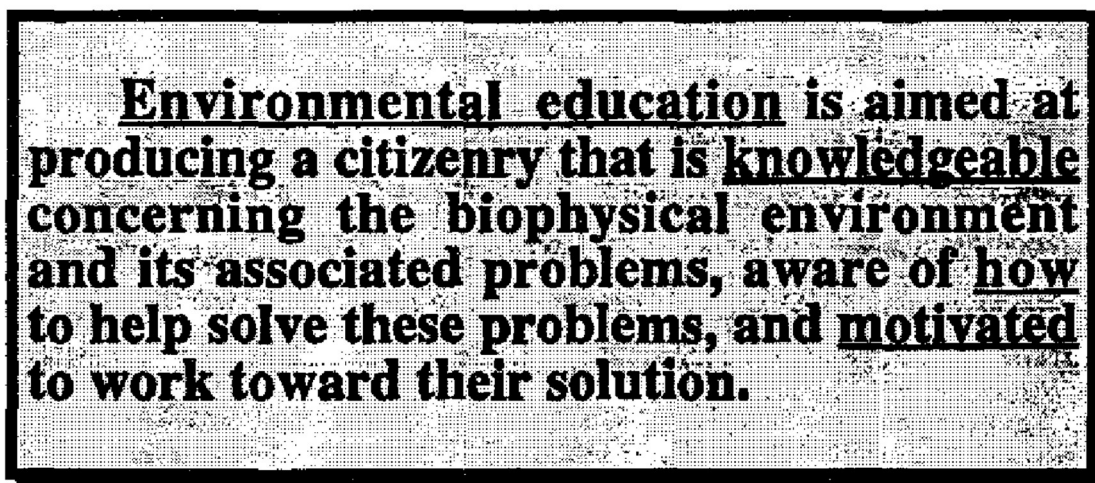


Fig.1 Definition of Environmental Education retrieved from Stapp et al. (1969) p.31

Stapp et al. (1969) argued that people need to develop an environmental attitude based on several actions, including i) acquiring information about the impact of the biophysical environment on people's lives; ii) understanding the issues and becoming concerned about them, iii) finding solutions to these issues; and iv) acting decisively to achieve the intended goals in solving environmental problems at local, political, and international levels.

After the first Earth Day celebration on April 22nd, 1970, US President Nixon signed the first Environmental Education Act on October 30th, 1970 (No Child Left Inside Coalition, 2009; Bennon et al., 2023). This law stated that a lack of awareness and understanding of environmental issues caused the degradation of the country's natural environment. Consequently, Congress acknowledged that schools played a crucial role in educating people about the environment, the issues that threaten it, and how to take action to maintain an 'ecological balance'. The government allocated funds to revise national curricula to include Environmental Education programs at elementary and secondary school levels (Sullivan and Schlesinger, 1972).

The UN conventions, conferences, charters, and summits that preceded Nixon's Act, organized over the last four decades, are also worth noting, as they demonstrate a shift from

a focus on EE to a greater emphasis on ESD. ESD not only concentrates on the environment but also emphasizes social and economic/governance aspects that impact the lives of millions.

The Stockholm UN Conference, held from June 5 to 16, 1972, was attended by 113 member states, including two Heads of State: Indira Gandhi of India and Olaf Palme of Sweden, and 250 non-governmental organizations. The conference was considered highly successful because it produced three major sets of decisions: i) the Stockholm Declaration, ii) Stockholm Action Plans with 109 recommendations for governments and international organizations to actively reduce environmental degradation, and iii) five resolutions. These resolutions included: i) banning nuclear weapon tests, ii) establishing a databank on international environmental data, iii) focusing on the effects of development on the environment, iv) making organizational changes internationally, and v) setting up an international environmental fund (UN, 2024).

The Stockholm Declaration outlines 26 principles and 109 recommendations. The most relevant to education was Principle 19, which focused on adult education and the education of younger generations, emphasizing support for vulnerable populations. It was also recommended that the media launch new campaigns to avoid promoting environmental degradation and focus on educating citizens about protecting their living environments and wildlife. Recommendation 96 suggests that the Secretary General of the UN establish an international environmental program that adopts an interdisciplinary approach in schools and local communities, integrating all levels of education, including children and adults in both rural and urban areas. Principle 19 and Recommendation 96 highlight the importance of education in empowering people to learn about environmental issues, develop solutions, and take action to improve the environment. Sometimes, people expect their governments and local leaders to solve problems, but this new approach recommends equipping citizens with the necessary tools, including skills and physical and financial resources, to act independently (UN, 1973).

The international Belgrade conference, held on October 22, 1975, followed the Stockholm Conference, highlighting the need for education to raise awareness about environmental degradation and to find solutions concerning the economic growth of highly developed countries at the expense of the natural resources of poor and underdeveloped countries. The Belgrade Charter had two main objectives:

- i) each nation had to define the basic meanings of 'quality of life' and 'human happiness' by recognizing the differences among people within the same nation, and
- ii) identifying appropriate actions to ensure the preservation and empowerment of humanity's potentials and to develop social and individual well-being in harmony with the biophysical and man-made environment (UNEP and UNESCO, 1976). It was stressed that the importance lay not only in caring for the environment and natural resources, but also in nurturing human relationships. Developing social relationships creates peaceful environments and reduces conflicts, leading to more time to focus on solving environmental issues.

The Belgrade Charter (UNEP and UNESCO, 1976) also presented six objectives of EE:

1. Awareness: People need to recognize environmental and social issues and become more sensitive to the problems they cause.
2. Knowledge: Citizens from a young age need to develop a basic understanding of their environment and how to solve problems through research.
3. Attitude: Citizens become concerned for their environment. They acquire the necessary social values, which help them actively participate in protecting the environment and suggest ways to improve their attitudes and behaviours.
4. Skill acquisition: Gaining the essential skills to address environmental issues.
5. Evaluation ability: The capacity to assess Environmental Education programs and the actions implemented. This can be achieved by encouraging both individual and collective reflection on attitudes and behaviours.
6. Participation: Understanding the role of individuals and social groups in taking responsibility to take effective action to solve problems. (UNEP and UNESCO, 1976, p.3-4)

The Tbilisi Conference held in 1977 established five key principles of EE.

Principle 1: When discussing the environment, all aspects should be considered, including natural, man-made, ecological, technological, and aesthetic factors.

Principle 2: EE should be an ongoing, lifelong process, not limited to a single generation.

Principle 3: EE must adopt an interdisciplinary approach, enabling learners to explore how social, political, and economic factors impact the environment.

Principle 4: EE should address current and potential future environmental issues.

Principle 5: It is essential to recognize the importance of active participation in finding solutions to prevent and manage environmental problems (Spinola, 2015; Filho et al., 2015).

The Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, is still remembered for the well-known Agenda 21, which led to various EE programs in schools (Agirreazkuenaga, 2019; Ballesteros et al., 2025). At this summit, representatives from 179 countries, NGOs, scientists, diplomats, and influential media figures attended. Countries discussed achievements on the 20th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. All delegates worked on an action plan that proposed new strategies for more sustainable development worldwide (Agirreazkuenaga, 2019; Ballesteros et al., 2025).

Agenda 21 has 40 chapters; however, Chapter 25 focuses specifically on children and youth in the context of SD. At that time, the UN estimated that 30% of the world's population was youth (UNESCO, 2014). In Chapter 25, it was recognized that the participation of youth and children in decision-making was essential. This is because most decisions will not only impact the present but also significantly influence future generations. Therefore, youths and children have the right to be involved in decision-making. It was also acknowledged that children and youths have a strong ability to organize themselves and seek support, while also offering a

unique perspective on environmental and socioeconomic issues (Sarabhai et al., 2012; Manni et al., 2013).

Five major objectives were proposed to protect and empower youths.

1) Governments were encouraged to increase dialogue with youth communities. They were invited to provide access to information and opportunities for youths and children to share their perspectives on government decisions.

2) By 2000, more than 50% of youths, with gender balance, should have attended secondary education or equivalent vocational programs.

3) It was noted that youth unemployment was disproportionately high compared to the overall unemployment rate, opening the door for abuse and oppression of youths. The delegates emphasized the importance of offering more opportunities for youths to find employment.

4) Promoting youth representation in all UN processes.

5) Governments need to combat abuses against human rights affecting many children and youths, especially women and girls. It was urged that governments provide all necessary resources to help vulnerable youths and children succeed and reach their potential (Chapman and Sharma, 2001).

At Rio's 1992 conference, there was a strong overall emphasis on youth and children's participation at local, national, and international levels. It was emphasized that children and youths need to have all possible opportunities to share their perspectives on social, economic development, and resource management. Governments were urged to provide education that reflects the economic and social needs of youths, and to incorporate environmental awareness and sustainable development into national curricula. The delegates also called for environmental scouting, where children and youths learn to discuss environmental issues at local, national, and international levels (Cléménçon, 2004; UN, no date a).

Agenda 21 strongly encouraged UNICEF to cooperate and collaborate with the UN, governments, and NGOs to develop educational programs for children to learn more about their environment and engage in activities that require decision-making, problem-solving, and immediate action (UN, 1992). Following the 1992 Rio Conference, other conferences and Summits were organized to reflect on achievements and identify areas where governments needed to focus their efforts to create actions toward SD (UN, no date b).

The Millennium Summit held in 2000 in New York was then remembered for establishing the eight Millennium Goals (UN, no date c), which were:

1. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger
2. All children attend primary education.
3. Empowering women and promoting gender equality.
4. Reducing child mortality by alleviating hunger and improving healthcare.
5. Improving maternal health, especially in third-world countries.

6. Finding cures and solutions for HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and other diseases that claim millions of lives worldwide.
7. Promoting environmental sustainability.
8. Promoting global partnerships where countries work together in areas like education, health, and sustainable development by sharing expertise and resources. A strong focus was again placed on education, which empowers children by providing access to information, teaching problem-solving skills, and allowing them to act decisively when necessary.

These goals focus on improving the health and education sectors in developing countries, enhancing environmental protection, combating poverty, promoting gender equality, and strengthening connections and partnerships between developed and developing nations.

2.3.2 From the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development to the Roadmap for 2030

The Johannesburg 2002 Conference was remembered for the considerable emphasis placed on the role of education as an essential tool for achieving SD (UN 2002). This led to the creation of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005 to 2014 (UN, 2002).

According to UNESCO (2002), the three main objectives of the DESD were:

1. ESD would help children acquire different skills (such as communication, critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving) so that they would be able to take an active part in the life of their immediate society.
2. Children learn how to respect life, diversity, and the earth.
3. Children advocate for democracy and peace within their societies by fighting against discrimination and social exclusion. (UN 2002, p. 4)

The primary objective of the DESD was to enhance the quality of life, particularly for marginalized groups, by advocating for gender equality, promoting democracy, and fostering active citizenship (UN, 2002). Schools were strongly recommended to focus more on ESD at the cross-curricular level, with attention to the various social and environmental issues that lead to injustice, poverty, and the marginalization of the most vulnerable people (UN, 2002; UN, 2014; Glavic, 2020).

Between June 20 and 22, 2012, the UN held the Rio+20 conference. This conference will be remembered for the birth of the 17 SDGs, which were built on the Millennium Development Goals. The governments agreed to adopt a 10-year program framework. These 17 SDGs were intended to call governments and citizens to action against poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation, while also prioritizing economic growth (Pradhan et al, 2017).

The 17 SDGs focus on protecting the planet by addressing climate change, safeguarding biodiversity, conserving oceans, and protecting ecosystems (Bulmer and Yáñez-Araque, 2023).

There is a very strong emphasis on making cities and local communities more sustainable to reduce air, sound, and water pollution. The primary objective was to encourage governments to promote inclusive economic growth by creating jobs with fair wages and sustainable economic opportunities (Cruz, 2023). Other SDGs also focus on eradicating hunger and poverty, as well as promoting health and education for all. This is combined with reducing inequalities by promoting fairness and addressing economic, social, and political inequalities within and among countries (Cruz, 2023).

Gender equality is emphasized to encourage governments to empower women and girls by providing opportunities for success, ensuring equal rights, and protecting them from discrimination and violence (Horton, 2015; Eden and Wagstaff, 2021). The Rio+20 conference focused on peace and global partnerships, as both motivate countries to find more sustainable ways and develop solutions to major environmental and social challenges that tend to marginalize and oppress the most vulnerable (Cruz, 2023). The emphasis is that the 17 SDGs as presented in figure 2 should not be addressed separately but rather collectively (Pradhan et al, 2017).



Fig.2 The 17 SDGs: National Geographic, 2024, accessed at <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/sustainable-development-goals/>. Accessed March 15, 2024)

In 2020, UNESCO published "Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap for 2030." Due to the health and travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this official

document could not be launched in person. As a result, UNESCO postponed in-person international events to 2021. The Berlin World Conference, held from May 17 to 19, was remembered for the official launch of the ESD: Roadmap for 2030 and the Berlin Declaration. This roadmap proposed five priority action areas to address the global climate and social crisis. Table 1 summarizes these five priority action areas.

Priority Action Area (PAA)	Focus
PAA1	Advancing Policy: Policies that ensure ESD is integrated in the formal, informal, and non-formal education. Policymakers need to ensure that ESD is not only supported by the education sector, but by all sectors involved in SD.
PAA2	Transforming learning environments: The learning environments (i.e., Schools and institutions) need to adjust to SD principles and get transformed. Learners <i>need to learn what they live and live what they learn</i> . (UNESCO 2020 p. 28).
PAA3	Building capacities of educators: Empowering educators by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to help children understand the choices needed to change their behaviours and transform their society, thereby becoming more pro-SD.
PAA4	Empowering and mobilizing youth: Empowering youths to advocate and voice their opinions on various causes, not only influencing policymakers and politicians to make pro-SD decisions, but also increasing their participation in actions that promote SD. Youth-led and youth-focused groups need to encourage young people to establish national and international networks, share best practices, and support one another.
PAA5	Accelerating local-level actions: Taking pro-SD action at a community level. Local councils, schools, and educational institutions need to promote lifelong learning and develop programs that increase knowledge about SD. Local communities need to take the initiative to contribute to achieving the SDGs. Such initiatives require government support and should be integrated into a national action plan on ESD for 2030.

Table 1: The five priority action areas as proposed by *ESD: A Roadmap for 2030* (UNESCO, 2020).

The Berlin Declaration recognized the importance of ESD in achieving the 2030 UN Agenda (UNESCO, 2022). It also highlights the need for education systems to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to find solutions to climate change, social inequalities, the loss of natural environments and biodiversity, and other related issues (UNESCO, 2022).

The latest international meeting, referred to as Stockholm +50, held in Stockholm in June 2022, was significant as it reflected on the achievements of the past 50 years and focused on the 5Rs as potential pathways to a healthier planet.

- 1) Reimagining a better future
- 2) Regeneration of ecosystems to enhance community and social resilience.
- 3) Promoting a green recovery, focusing on COVID-19 recovery.
- 4) Rebalancing resource use and development to ensure equity.
- 5) Reinvigorating and renewing multilateralism to increase cooperation and support among countries. (UNESCO, 2022)

Summary of all the conferences, declarations, and meetings on EE and ESD, organised from 1972 to 2022

Event	Year	Country	Importance
Stockholm Declaration	1972	Stockholm (Sweden)	The first UN Conference on EE
Belgrade Charter	1975	Belgrade (Former Yugoslavia)	Presented the six objectives of EE, focusing not only on the environment but also on human relationships.
Tbilisi Conference	1977	Tbilisi (Georgia)	Developed the five principles of EE.
Earth Summit (RIO)	1992	Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)	Agenda 21 led to the birth of EE programs in schools.
Johannesburg Summit	2002	Johannesburg (South Africa)	Launching of the UN Decade of ESD (DESD)
Millenium Summit	2000	New York (US)	Launching of the Millennium Goals (MDGs)
Rio +20	2012	Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)	Confirmed the importance of the global sustainability goals and the declaration “The Future We Want”.
Berlin 2021	2021	Berlin (Germany)	Launch of the ESD Roadmap for 2030 and the Berlin Declaration.
Stockholm +50	2022	Stockholm (Sweden)	Reflecting on 50 years of ESD, focusing on the 5Rs for a healthier planet.

Table 2: Summary of UN initiatives pro-EE and ESD.

2.4 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Siwi et al. (2025) defined Sustainable Development (SD) as a responsibility that all citizens have to improve not only the well-being of everyone (regardless of cultural diversity, sexual orientation, and social status) but also the various ecosystems. According to them and Glavic (2020), this could be achieved by engaging the entire community to address both current and future environmental and social issues.

In most UN conferences, it has been noted that education plays a vital role in addressing global environmental, social, and economic challenges (Glavic, 2020; Hartanti et al., 2024; Mengyao and Ismail, 2025). Mengyao and Ismail (2025) noted that the primary objective of ESD is to achieve all 17 SDGs through formal, informal, and non-formal education. They also stated that, according to the UNESCO documents mainly: *Roadmap for implementing the global action program on ESD* (UNESCO 2014) and *ESD: A Roadmap to 2030* (UNESCO 2020), ESD

aims to empower students to make well-informed decisions that enable them to take responsible actions to ensure environmental integrity, a just and inclusive society (respecting all forms of diversity), and economic sustainability for current and future generations (Mengyao and Ismail, 2025). Korkmaz and Vildiz (2017) emphasized that, although everyone is responsible for ensuring sustainability, schools play a crucial role in shaping children's sustainability thinking and philosophy from a very young age to adulthood.

There are seven key characteristics and principles that have been outlined in various publications, primarily in three major ones: Guidelines and Recommendations for Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability (UNESCO, 2005), Roadmap for Implementing the Global Action Programme on ESD (UNESCO, 2014), and Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap to 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) to ensure successful implementation of ESD programs and the achievement of the 17 SDGs. The seven key characteristics and principles are:

- i) Transformation and change
- ii) Education for all and lifelong learning
- iii) Envisioning a better future
- iv) Engaging in critical thinking and reflection
- v) Participating in decision-making at both local and international levels
- vi) Collaborating with school authorities to actively take part in decision-making
- vii) Understanding the links between environmental, economic, social, and political systems.

UNESCO recommends that ESD programs, such as Eco-School programs, adopt these seven key characteristics and principles to empower children and local communities to become agents of change (UNESCO, 2014; UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, these principles are in place to enable children and local communities not only to become aware of environmental and social issues but also to take the necessary actions to change their lifestyles and behaviours (UNESCO, 2005; Venkataraman, 2009; Wiek et al, 2011; UNESCO, 2014; UNESCO, 2020). In the following subsections, these characteristics and principles will be discussed in turn, with the aim of demonstrating how eco-school programs can achieve different SDGs by using these principles and characteristics as a guide to solve their school and community's environmental and social issues (thus creating a more sustainable environment).

2.4.1 Transformation and change

One of the main focuses of both the UN DESD (UNESCO, 2014) and the ESD: Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) was on providing quality education to societies as an effective way to promote transformation and change. A recurring issue often discussed in literature (McKeown and Hopkins, 2007; Holst et al., 2020; Mogren et al., 2019), as well as in various UN conferences, is that many people understand the need to act (as they are aware of environmental and social issues); however, the required transformations and changes are still slow and ineffective. People living in wealth and comfort often struggle to recognize that their actions not only impact the environment (through the consumption of fuels, pollution, and

excessive use of natural resources) but also contribute to social injustice and exclusion (such as child labour, poverty, and gender inequalities) (Filho et al., 2017).

Mogren et al. (2019) emphasize that through ESD programs, such as eco-school programs, children have the opportunity not only to learn about climate change, poverty, and discrimination but also, from a young age, they discover SD strategies that reduce environmental and social issues. Thakran (2015) stated that changing habits and behaviours towards pro-sustainability helps improve not only individual lifestyles but also promotes a communal transformation that enables better management of resources (e.g. the 3Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle), enhances understanding of diversity, and fosters peace and justice within communities. It also promotes gender equality, the eradication of poverty, and ensures access to clean water and sanitation for all social groups (Thakran, 2015).

The tension between ESD and the neoliberalization of education is viewed by many writers as a significant obstacle to social transformation and change (Khan, 2015; Agirreazkuenaga, 2019; Schulte, 2022). Khan (2015), Schulte (2022), and Smith and Past (2024) discussed the conflict between ESD and the neoliberalisation of education, focusing on the main characteristics of each and how they conflict. While ESD encourages student-centred learning, helping students develop SD skills over time, the neoliberalisation of education focuses on education as a tool for personal success (through standardisation and accountability) rather than as a means of social transformation. Smith and Past (2024) claim that neoliberal education systems focus on measuring competencies, obtaining qualifications, marketizing education, testing, and controlling teachers' performance. Therefore, students acquire the essential skills needed for competitive workplaces and, as a result, education systems become focused on auditing, evaluation, testing, and accreditation (Giroux, 2015; Giroux, 2020). Moreover, many teachers complain that the syllabi are extensive and content-heavy, leading to more 'banking education' and fewer chances for dialogue, discussion, and reflection (Agirreazkuenaga, 2019; Giroux, 2020).

Eilam and Trop (2011) explained that if ESD programs remain extracurricular, it becomes very difficult for all students to develop SD skills, since only committee members and interested students supporting these committees would gain such abilities. They added that this results in a situation in which children have less time to learn about one another, their cultures, perspectives, and concerns. Thus, sharing experiences would be limited to occasional class activities organized by a few subject teachers interested in Sustainable Development and Citizenship Education. However, according to Kalla et al. (2022), if ESD programs are integrated into the formal curriculum and taught across subjects, children learn how to turn challenges into opportunities that can change their habits and lifestyles. By presenting the Swedish example, which adopted ESD within the formal curriculum, Cars and West (2015) showed how children were given more time to think critically about research issues related to their schools and local communities, thereby solving these problems.

2.4.2 Education for all and lifelong learning

The need for education for all children has been discussed since the first EE conference in Stockholm. Education has always been recognised as the key to solving several environmental

and social issues. However, in many underdeveloped countries, education was often prioritized for children of wealthy families and boys (Lutz, Muttarak, and Striessnig, 2014; DaSouza and Jackman, 2024). The World Economic Forum (2020) noted that, despite agreements among world leaders to support and cooperate in providing compulsory education for primary and secondary school students, an estimated 263 million children and youth still did not attend school. It has also been projected that, at that rate, only 32 million children would be added to enrolment by 2030, resulting in an 88% shortfall of the target.

Thakran (2015) and Purnamasari et al. (2024), explained that by empowering children, not only by providing them with information and knowledge but also by enabling them to process the information and think about solutions, they learn how to take responsibility for the present as well as for future generations. For Purnamasari et al. (2024), project-based initiatives help students develop new ways of understanding their natural and social environments and also teach them how to transform their learning environment through a whole-school approach. Similarly, Pratiwi et al. (2025) argued that if children are given knowledge and information about issues, they might not be empowered or motivated to think about solutions, as they assume adults will solve the problems. However, if they are allowed to research, generate their own knowledge, and suggest solutions, they learn that their contributions are valuable. This is the type of education that the Maltese *National Education Strategy 2024-2030* (Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth Research and Innovation, 2023) proposed to meet the set targets (those of reducing absenteeism in compulsory education, reducing the number of students who finish compulsory education without acquiring literacy and numeracy as their basic skills, and reducing the percentage of early school leavers). In addition, this document also refers to two important EU Level Targets 2030: By 2025, at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning over the previous 12 months, and by 2030, the share of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainments should be at least 45%. These two targets are very important because the government is demonstrating its commitment to investing in adult education and lifelong learning.

Cornet et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of schools investing more in lifelong learning and offering community-oriented ESD programs to empower citizens and help them learn to solve local environmental and social issues. According to them, these programs should involve concrete, community-based projects that are interactive, participatory, and encourage critical thinking and action. Their case study was conducted with two Indian tribal communities and a higher education institution. The research team selected two community-led initiatives, each led by a team of six students. Data was collected through field journals, project reports, observations, and interviews. This study demonstrated that community-led initiatives empowered communities through participatory approaches, enabling local groups to identify suitable solutions to their issues, address their needs, and develop the capabilities and knowledge necessary to handle future local challenges (Cornet et al., 2024).

2.4.3 Envisioning a better future

UNESCO (2014) affirmed that ESD programs should aim to teach young children about environmental issues, such as climate change, pollution, the destruction of biodiversity, marine contamination by waste, and unsustainable human activities, including excessive

pesticide use and ecosystem disruption. By creating awareness and understanding of how unsustainable activities negatively impact our health and that of future generations, children learn to identify more sustainable practices and habits (Venkataraman, 2009; UNESCO, 2014; UNESCO, 2020; Xu and Luo, 2020). According to Almazroa, Alotaibi, and Alrwaythi (2024), identifying and understanding problems and exploring ways to solve them helps children develop values and skills that promote more sustainable lifelong habits. Additionally, Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) argued that while understanding the importance of caring for their environment (both natural and social), children become leaders who not only influence each other to reduce waste, recycle, save energy, and use more eco-friendly resources but also have the potential to inspire their parents and local communities to make better choices. Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) added that when children are actively involved in ESD programs, they recognize that cleaner environments (such as greener spaces at schools and in communities) and improved air quality contribute to better physical and mental well-being.

International research on eco-schools (Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen, 2020; Copsey et al., 2024; Mengyao and Ismail, 2025) and local research on EkoSkola (McLean, 2017; Vassallo, 2021) have demonstrated that these programs tend to highlight how students identify solutions and positive impacts in different school projects, focusing less on the environmental crisis. UNESCO (2020) emphasized that this approach is important because it helps ESD programs foster hope and optimism in children rather than instilling fear and apathy. In addition, UNESCO (2014) noted that children become resilient and perseverant when they are empowered and shown that their actions are effective and lead to positive change. Conversely, fear and apathy discourage new initiatives and reduce interest not only in their own potential but also in the belief that concrete, sustainable actions can lead to better and healthier lifestyles (UNESCO, 2014; Holfelder, 2019; UNESCO, 2020; Ojala, 2023). Another key characteristic of ESD in envisioning a better future is that while children implement ESD programs, they are given responsibilities that help them understand their actions and initiatives can produce positive change where everyone benefits, both present and future generations (Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen, 2020; Copsey et al., 2024).

The ESD: Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) emphasizes the importance of developing environmentally conscious generations. This creates a foundation for communities that strike a balance between nature, equity, and resilience. Therefore, effectively implementing ESD projects in schools helps both schools and local communities see sustainability as the norm rather than an exception (Vassallo, 2021). As a result, sustainability will be viewed as a tangible solution to environmental and social issues (that negatively impact people's lives), encouraging hope for a better future (Ojala, 2023).

2.4.4 Engaging in critical thinking and reflection

Purnamasari et al. (2024) claimed that the shift from knowledge reception to knowledge generation through research, dialogue, and the sharing of experiences and ideas helps children think more critically and reflect on how their behaviours and actions influence others

(socially) and their natural environment. According to UNESCO (2016), in the context of ESD, critical thinking involves questioning practices, assumptions, values, and social norms, as well as, analyzing information from various sources, such as online research, observations, questionnaires with the school community, and local communities. This helps in making informed decisions to address sustainability issues. The UNESCO Competency Framework (UNESCO, 2016) highlights critical thinking as a key competency for SD. UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that critical thinking in ESD goes beyond skills; it also includes ethical awareness, normative understanding, and recognizing how individual and collective actions can impact future generations. According to Leś and Moroz (2021), critical thinking should be a tool that helps individuals evaluate environmental and social issues by understanding their complexities, analyzing evidence gathered through research, and appreciating diverse perspectives within communities.

Shudak and Avoseh (2015) explain that dialogic approaches in teaching, such as focusing on problem-solving, promoting debates, and using concept mapping, help students become active learners by showing them how to articulate, defend, and clarify their ideas, perceptions, and viewpoints. Alsarayreh (2021) states that there are four main reasons to develop critical thinking skills in education. First, it provides students with opportunities to value others as part of moral education. Second, these skills help students understand themselves through self-sufficiency and self-direction. Third, critical thinking enhances learning in academic subjects such as science, math, and history. Finally, Alsarayreh (2021) highlights that the fourth reason for developing critical thinking in education is to improve how children interpret what is happening around them, analyze situations more effectively, and make better decisions that affect their lives and those of others.

UNESCO (2020) affirmed that reflections in ESD should be regarded as a transformative process where students learn to connect theory to their real-life experiences, helping them better understand the complexities of environmental and social issues in their schools and local communities. Wink (2005) and Rizvi (2009) both described how reflective practices enable students to experience personal growth, such as learning to think about their feelings about social injustice, discrimination, and environmental degradation, and to become more sustainable. These practices foster better ethical judgments and encourage a sense of responsibility in creating and advocating for a healthier physical and social environment. UNESCO (2014) considers reflection an essential skill, alongside critical thinking, because both promote individual awareness and collective action by revealing personal values, biases, and behaviours that, in many cases, contribute to sustainability challenges. Rizvi (2009) and Wiek et al. (2011) explain that nurturing reflexive individuals from a young age through ESD not only aims to improve knowledge about natural and social environments but also to promote transformative learning that supports pro-sustainability attitudes and behaviours.

2.4.5 Partnership with school authorities to actively participate in decision-making

The ESD: A Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) highlights the importance of ESD programs that involve children in decision-making about projects related to the school environment and SD. Sun and Leithwood (2015) demonstrated that when HOSs show respect and care by recognizing and acknowledging the different vulnerabilities of staff and students, trust is built. According to them and Leithwood et al. (2009), trust plays a vital role in creating effective teamwork where opportunities are provided for all members—school leadership teams, educators, parents, and children—to learn from each other and effectively anticipate and respond to the school’s varied needs (Leithwood et al., 2009). Bush (2011) emphasized the importance of adopting a participative approach in schools. This approach not only fosters stronger bonds among staff members but also helps children feel more empowered and motivated to contribute when necessary. This concept is also thoroughly discussed in the ESD: A Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020), which strongly recommends providing children with opportunities to share their ideas and discuss ways to make schools more pro-SD through whole-school projects led by the students themselves.

The ESD: A Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) also highlights the importance of promoting ESD in schools, enabling children to make decisions that positively impact the school environment and contribute to sustainable development. Leithwood et al. (2004) emphasized that when educators and children participate in decision-making, there is greater commitment to achieving organizational goals, as everyone takes ownership of the changes and works to create a better environment.

Dana Mitra, Jean Ruddock, and Michael Fielding were three influential writers who highlighted the importance of students’ voices in improving our education systems. They all discussed how children could become more involved in decision-making and act as agents of change. Their work focused on shifting pedagogies from teacher-centred approaches to student-centred approaches, creating opportunities to facilitate the transfer of knowledge both from teachers to learners and from learners to teachers (Rudduck, 1996; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2017; Mitra, 2018; Fielding, 2004; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Fielding, 2011; Freire, 1970/2017). Children’s voices are often perceived as a significant challenge to the status quo, as adults frequently view them as a threat to authority (Hanna, 2021). This becomes more evident when teachers are not properly trained to provide children with opportunities to actively participate in lessons. Chapman and Sharma (2001) emphasized that SD programs should seize the opportunity to involve more students in creating a school climate that embraces diversity, helping students feel a greater sense of belonging at school.

Mogren and Gericke (2019) explained that ESD programs in schools should focus on enabling students to advise and recommend sustainable practices to school leadership teams (SLTs), educators, and peers. They added that such practices need to encourage a whole-school approach, where school community members realise the importance of, for example, generating less waste, separating waste correctly, and conserving water and energy to reduce pollution. By proposing new practices, initiatives, and behaviours pro-SD, children will find

opportunities to make decisions with the school leadership. Torsdottir et al. (2024) conducted 902 surveys with students attending three upper secondary Norwegian schools to determine how students felt when participating in decision-making to create a more sustainable environment at their schools. The results showed that students felt a sense of ownership and empowerment, and became role models for one another by promoting pro-sustainability habits and behaviours. According to Torsdottir et al. (2024), when Committee members successfully led initiatives addressing environmental and social issues in their schools, they integrated action for the common good into their school identity. Additionally, Forssten et al. (2023) argued that children can guide SLTs to focus on school priorities that equip children with the skills to make informed decisions and take proactive actions for sustainability.

2.4.6 Participation in decision-making on a local and international level

Having a school that emphasizes the adoption of effective SD practices can facilitate similar adaptations within local communities, with the support of local councils (Forssten et al., 2023). Huang et al. (2025) showed how children attending two schools in Melbourne (Australia) were involved in an ESD program to reduce vehicle idling in their school vicinities. Children were empowered and given opportunities to encourage adults to change their habits and behaviours (by reducing car use and adopting other sustainable means), aiming to reduce air pollution near their schools. Children felt more confident in using their skills and competencies to participate in decision-making and contributed to implementing necessary changes at the local level (Huang et al., 2025).

Students need opportunities to participate in decision-making with local communities, focusing on issues such as waste management, green transportation, and community garden development (Huang et al., 2025; Kolenatý and Cinčera, 2025). By organizing awareness campaigns, clean-up activities, and tree-planting initiatives, children can help local communities understand that caring for common and recreational areas benefits everyone's physical and mental well-being (Holfelder, 2019; Misiaszek, 2020). Mogren, Gericke, and Scherp (2019) presented a model outlining how a school organization could transfer knowledge and sustainability initiatives to local communities. This can be achieved in three steps: first, sharing a common vision of ESD, which must be agreed upon and negotiated at all school levels (educators and children) and with stakeholders (such as local councils) with whom the school forms partnerships. The second step involves integrating this vision into the school community's routines and organizational structures. The third step involves creating spaces for the school and local communities to exchange ideas and opinions on addressing changes and solving environmental and social problems. This aligns with UNESCO's (2014) final report on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. UNESCO (2014) emphasized that partnerships among schools, local communities, and NGOs enhance capacity among all involved, strengthen stakeholder relationships, encourage innovation, and increase resource allocation to support initiatives that help achieve ESD goals.

UNESCO (2020) emphasized that eco-school committees need opportunities to be part of youth representation, including participation in national youth conferences and forums, and

to make decisions at the local and national levels. These representatives would have the chance to discuss issues related to climate and SD. Additionally, such representatives can encourage students' participation in global campaigns, such as Earth Hour and World Cleanup Days; attend youth committee meetings at international climate summits and UN forums; and help children and youths voice their opinions not only nationally but also internationally by creating networks with other schools. Bennell (2015) and Rauch (2016) explained that networking is crucial when implementing ESD programs, as it encourages children and youths to share ideas and best practices for adopting SD practices in their local communities and at the national level.

2.4.7 Understanding connections between Environmental, Social, and Economic pillars of sustainability.

The Brundtland Report, published in 1987, was the first document to discuss the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic pillars (Brundtland, 1987). This document explains how sustainability is seen as a development model that addresses current societal needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. Through ESD, children learn about the impact of development on ecosystems, how pollution affects people's lives, and the consequences of overusing natural resources (environmental pillar). Brundtland's social pillar emphasizes social inclusion of individuals with diverse needs, minority groups, and those considered disadvantaged or vulnerable. This provides an opportunity to understand the importance of respecting human rights, maintaining working conditions that ensure gender equality, and protecting people of different sexual orientations and religious beliefs from discrimination. The third pillar, as outlined by Brundtland, focuses on improving living standards for individuals within businesses and companies while ensuring profitability. Effective governance evaluates business ethics and management, promoting transparency and sustainable business practices.

Glavič (2020) supported the idea that from a young age, children need to understand the importance of balancing these three pillars to promote a sustainable lifestyle. At all UN conferences and summits, considerable emphasis was placed on all participating governments to view economic growth not only as an isolated component, but also to be aware of the relationships among economic, environmental, and social factors that influence and affect one another in various ways (Glavič, 2020). When one component negatively impacts the others, governments need to take proactive measures to ensure SD (Glavič, 2020).

2.5 The origins of Eco-Schools and their promotion of ESD programs

The Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 will be remembered for how politicians, diplomats, NGOs, and other representatives from 179 countries recognized not only the importance of SD in addressing social, economic, and environmental issues, but also the need to invest in the future. There was consensus that SD can be achieved only if it plays a crucial role in education (Tonuk and Kayihan, 2013). Politicians could only implement temporary changes and pass

laws, but education was seen as essential since children have the opportunity to acquire skills and competencies that can guide them toward a sustainable lifestyle (Spinola, 2015). As a result, the eco-school program was created to address the needs identified during the conference.

In 1994, the Eco-school program was launched in four countries: the UK, Greece, Denmark, and Germany. According to FEE (2022), for a successful implementation of the eco-school program in schools, the program needs to follow a seven-step methodology:

Step 1: Forming an Eco committee: The committee's role is to represent the students. It is composed of students, educators, and non-teaching staff who are interested in discussing and acting on environmental and social issues. The committee is student-led and must meet to discuss issues observed and experienced at school, locally, and/or at a national level. The committee needs to involve the entire school and promote its work within the school and the local community.

Step 2: Conducting a Sustainability Audit: An initial and important task for an Eco-school committee is to conduct a sustainability audit using various data-collection methods. The more students involved in this audit, the better the results, as children need to identify environmental and social issues in their schools. They should observe, ask each other questions, and reflect on areas that need improvement.

Step 3: Action planning: After identifying areas for improvement, the committee should then create SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) action plans. These plans will guide the committee over the course of two school years. They should include the tasks to be completed, the people responsible for monitoring and evaluation, and a clear timeline for achieving the goals.

Step 4: Monitor and evaluate: The committee, with help from other students, monitors the progress of the action plans and displays achievements on the school's main notice board, making them visible to all students. Promoting results is crucial, as it motivates the entire school to work harder toward achieving the set goals. Throughout the school year, action plans should be regularly evaluated to determine if goals are being met and if adjustments are necessary.

Step 5: ESD is part of the curriculum: The committee needs to collaborate with the school leadership team and teachers to ensure ESD is integrated across all subjects. The committee supports educators by researching ways to embed ESD across all academic areas. This helps children learn research skills, think critically, and develop problem-solving abilities.

Step 6: Inform and Engage: This step is essential because the committee must adopt a whole-school approach in all actions taken to reach the set goals. While the Eco-school committee plays a crucial role in effectively managing the program, the entire school needs to actively participate in implementing the necessary changes. The most successful eco-school committees are those that motivate and encourage all students to take part and work toward sustainable development. Additionally, the committees should build connections with local communities and NGOs. They need to share their work, ideas, and perspectives on local and

national levels. This increases public awareness, educates people on issues affecting their lives, promotes social inclusion, and protects the environment. They also collaborate with local authorities to identify solutions to environmental and social issues that affect many residents.

Step 7: Creating an eco-code. An eco-code is a statement that reflects the school's commitment to a sustainable lifestyle.

The program takes about two years to implement and must adhere to the seven principles of ESD (as discussed earlier in Section 2.3). If all criteria are met, the school can apply for the Green Flag Award, which FEE awards. To earn the Green Flag, the committee must present its work, achievements, assessments, and evaluations to a panel of judges (representing FEE) and explain them (Schroder, Wals, and van Koppen, 2020; Sousa, 2022). If all the criteria are met the award is given.

According to FEE (2023c), on the 10th anniversary of Eco-school programs in 2004, Eco-school International reported that 4,487,807 students across 12,640 schools participated in Eco-school initiatives. By 2019, the Eco-school program had been adopted in 59,000 schools across 68 countries worldwide. During its 25th anniversary celebration in 2018, FEE committed to expanding the program to all countries within the next 25 years (FEE, 2023c).

International research (Pauw and Van Petegem, 2011; Spinola, 2015; Schroder, Wals, and van Koppen, 2020; Sousa, 2022) on Eco-Schools indicates that, in some way, students and communities benefit from these SD programs. Krnel and Naglic (2009), as cited by Spinola (2015), compared environmental literacy among students attending Eco-Schools and those attending regular schools in Slovenia. They concluded that knowledge was the key factor, showing a statistically significant improvement. Spinola (2015) reported that a similar study was conducted in Iceland. This study compared environmental knowledge, attitudes, and actions between Green Flag Schools (GFS) and regular schools. The results showed that although GFS students were more aware of environmental issues, they did not score significantly higher in environmental knowledge and attitudes.

Similarly, in Belgium, Pauw and Van Petegem (2011) conducted research with 1287 students attending 38 GFS and 21 regular schools. They found that students attending GFS had significantly better environmental knowledge, but the results did not show improvements in environmental attitudes and behaviours. On the other hand, Ozsoy, Ertepinar, and Saglam (2012), who studied 316 students attending elementary schools in Turkey, showed that students who attended Eco-Schools experienced a statistically significant increase in both knowledge and environmental attitudes. Similarly, Spinola (2015) found that, after five years of participating in Eco-Schools programs, students on Madeira Island, Portugal, increased their knowledge of sustainability and displayed better attitudes and behaviours that supported sustainability. This international research examining the operation of Eco-Schools indicated that the program enhanced awareness and understanding of environmental issues and SD. In a similar study, Cassar Cordina (2015) noted that in some countries, such as Malta, more efforts were needed to bring about changes in attitudes and behaviours that enhance the quality of life. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from Maltese educators serving in classes from Year 3 to Year 6. The results demonstrated that educators

have low or unclear levels of awareness and knowledge of various ESD concepts, despite several ESD values and skills being integrated into their pedagogies (Cassar Cordina, 2015). This made it more difficult for the educators and students to understand why changes in attitudes and behaviours were essential to improve their quality of life.

FEE (2023a) outlined four ESD programs adopted internationally, including in Malta, which Eco-school committees carry out to address particular social and environmental issues faced by their schools or local communities. These are: the Litter Less Campaign, the YRE (Young Reporters for the Environment), the Leaf, and the We Eat Responsibly programs. All four ESD programs are also overseen by FEE, with each participating school's Eco-school committee selecting and developing a project that targets the specific needs of that school.

The **Litter Less Campaign program** was launched in 2011 and focuses on reducing and managing litter at the school, local, and national levels (FEE, 2023e; FEE, 2023f). Since then, 35 countries have participated in the project, with 4.6 million students actively involved in reducing litter, which causes significant environmental issues worldwide. This environmental literacy project can operate in both formal and non-formal settings (FEE, 2023g).

The **YRE program** began in France in 1991. At that time, concerns about ozone layer depletion were rising, and an international youth mission travelled to Kiruna (Sweden) to learn about the issue and help the public understand its complexity. This experimental program aimed to raise awareness of personal responsibility for protecting the environment. In 1994, the YRE project became an FEE program, and that year, Luxembourg was recognized as the first country to officially implement it (FEE, 2023h).

Since then, more than 450000 students from 44 countries have participated in this program. This project enables students to express themselves, share their research with the public, and explore issues that impact people's lives (FEE, 2023h). The YRE program uses a four-step approach (Young Reporters for the Environment, 2025): 1) Investigate, 2) Research solutions, 3) Report, and 4) Disseminate.

- 1) Identifying the main local environmental issues involves gathering information from various sources such as interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and social media. It also includes assessing the social, political, and economic implications and considering the possible consequences of the investigated issue. Ultimately, local environmental issues are closely tied to the broader global context (Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019b; Young Reporters for the Environment, 2025).
- 2) Finding solutions through research. Information and knowledge are collected from experts and stakeholders, and the effectiveness of these solutions is assessed (Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019b; Young Reporters for the Environment, 2025).
- 3) Reporting the issue and potential solutions to a targeted audience is a crucial strategy that requires careful planning to keep the audience interested and eager to learn more. The article should be supported by photos and videos that serve as evidence of the chosen issue (Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019b; Young Reporters for the Environment, 2025).

- 4) Dissemination: The work is shared with the targeted audience through various media, exhibitions, and local events (Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019b; Young Reporters for the Environment, 2025).

The **Leaf (Learning about Forests) program** started as a Forest in Schools initiative in 1999 in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. It was then introduced in Malta during the 2011-2012 school year (FEE, 2023c). This program, which runs in conjunction with Ekoskola and YRE, focuses on protecting forests and woodlands (FEE, 2023b). Children have the opportunity to learn about the conservation of endemic trees. Throughout the program, students not only learn how to plant and protect trees but also discover sustainable ways for people to prevent deforestation and woodland degradation (FEE, 2023d).

Human activities, such as using paper and wood, dumping waste in forests, lighting fires near trees, and cutting trees for farming or road expansion, threaten local trees, increase pollution, and reduce the amount of oxygen in the air. This program also encourages children to discuss ways to reduce pollution in towns and cities with local officials, such as introducing more green spaces and implementing car restrictions.

The Leaf pedagogical cycle (FEE, 2023d; Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019a) involves four important processes:

1. Looking and observing: Watching nature and learning about living things and ecosystems.
2. Exploring: By encouraging more outdoor learning, children explore different things and learn about nature through hands-on activities.
3. Analysing: Reflecting on and critically thinking about human behaviours that influence the entire ecosystem. Through observations and exploration, children learn to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle without disrupting natural environments.
4. Function and Flourish: Children are encouraged to become active learners by engaging more in outdoor learning and participating in local and national conservation efforts. (FEE, 2023b; FEE, 2023d; Nature Trust- FEE Malta, 2019a)

We Eat Responsibly began as an EU-funded project supported and managed by FEE, running from 2015 to 2018 across eight EU countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Poland, Latvia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Malta (EkoSkola Malta, 2025; Glopolis, 2025). This program focuses on sustainable food systems, food waste management, and responsible consumption patterns. It helps children connect food choices with global issues, fostering values of solidarity, environmental care, and empathy (Glopolis, 2025). EkoSkola committees participate in research projects to collaborate with local farmers, establish school gardens or green areas, and launch campaigns to reduce meat consumption. The core idea is that food is not just a personal choice but a shared responsibility (EkoSkola Malta, 2025; Glopolis, 2025).

2.6 EkoSkola and other ESD programs

The EkoSkola (the Maltese name for Eco-school) program was launched in Malta in 2002. Nature Trust Malta, a non-profit, non-governmental environmental organization, joined FEE

International (Bezzina and Pace, 2004). Six local schools initiated this pilot project, aiming to promote environmental ethics within their respective school communities. The latest statistics shared by the Office of the Permanent Secretary (2025) showed that, as of April 2025, 125 schools in Malta were participating in EkoSkola projects (with approximately 51657 students considered active participants), of which 83 schools had been awarded one or more green flags.

Although statistics published by FEE Malta on the official EkoSkola Malta website indicate that the EkoSkola program is gaining popularity among Maltese schools as more schools adopt it (EkoSkola Malta, 2024), research on EkoSkola and ESD remains limited. Most of the literature reviewed below is important for this thesis, as it will be compared to the results presented in Chapter 4, which discusses the findings of this research study.

In her studies on EkoSkola, Grech (2010) found that, whether attending GFS (Green flag school) or non-GFS schools, Maltese students were highly participative and took concrete actions to protect the environment. However, GFS students were more assertive, assuming active, environmentally responsible citizenship roles within their schools and local communities. Grech (2010) also noted that many students involved in EkoSkola committees were not active members of environmental pressure groups.

Portelli's (2011) study aimed to identify secondary school students' attitudes toward their environment. Using questionnaires, the researcher examined Form 4 students (aged 14-15) in Maltese secondary schools. The results showed that students attending church schools and Junior Lyceum (who had passed the 11+ exam, which was abolished in 2010) held more positive attitudes toward the environment compared to those attending Area secondary schools (former schools where students who had failed the 11+ exam attended). Portelli (2011) stated that the more academically capable the students were, the more positive their attitudes tended to be.

The results revealed a lack of knowledge about biodiversity, and the majority of students strongly agreed that killing endangered species was considered very wrong. Students had a good understanding of the causes of air pollution, but were unaware of what noise pollution was. At that time, the students were unaware that most countries worldwide relied on renewable energy as their primary energy source. For most research participants, the most influential factors shaping students' attitudes were school, television, the internet, and family.

In another study, Gauci (2011) examined the role of EkoSkola in promoting student diversity in Malta. The study focused on three main types of diversity: academic, cultural, and physical diversity. Data were collected through weekly observations of EkoSkola committee meetings and semi-structured interviews with 10 students, parents of children on the committee, and SLT members. This research identified several factors: the committee was highly homogeneous, consisting of students from the same Form 4 class; students did not participate in decision-making related to teaching and learning; and students with low academic abilities showed a lack of motivation and ownership of the school. These students viewed school as an obligation, displaying little interest in anything beyond the minimum requirements. The researcher also argued that low participation was partly due to issues of self-esteem and

dissatisfaction with schooling. Outdoor and hands-on activities were essential for increasing students' connection to their school, helping them succeed. The researcher observed that during breaks, students with low academic abilities found it difficult to integrate with their peers. The participating committees emphasized the importance of parental and community involvement when implementing EkoSkola programs. Parents' role was to support and guide their children through these initiatives. Local councils had been consulted and supported the committees, while nearby primary schools participated in various activities organized by the EkoSkola committee. Gauci (2011) also explored why minority groups were underrepresented in committees and did not actively take part in initiatives. A major barrier was the language of instruction and communication, as well as clustering issues. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds felt more confident and comfortable sharing ideas and expressing themselves when interacting with peers from similar backgrounds. Another observation was the absence of students with special needs, such as those with disabilities or specific conditions, from the committees. The researcher attributed this to four main reasons.

- i) The physical barriers that inhibit physical participation;
- ii) Lack of encouragement from other peers and educators to attend committee meetings;
- iii) Disabled students participated in other activities, such as expressive arts and drama, which these students considered more adequate to their specific needs.
- iv) Time constraints that leave little time for the students to participate.

This study revealed that students often acted as passive observers, participating in only a few activities selected by their teachers. There were time constraints, as teachers were more focused on finishing the syllabi, leaving students with less time for class discussions (especially on topics related to ESD). However, the committee helped their peers to nurture a sense of belonging, ownership, and solidarity towards others. Committee members learned how to compromise and engage in constructive discussions (to help each other). Students were proud of their achievements and felt motivated when introducing new initiatives at their schools. In addition, when students participated in decision-making, they learned to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Participation in committee meetings boosted the students' self-esteem since they were doing things they felt good at, and concrete results were observed.

Gauci (2011) demonstrated that EkoSkola programs improved teacher-student communication and promoted a whole-school approach to working on common goals. However, despite the efforts of the participant EkoSkola committee, Gauci (2011) also observed some staff members who showed little enthusiasm and participation. Gauci (2011) attributed this to several factors: a lack of ownership, insufficient time due to involvement in other school activities, limited knowledge of EE and ESD among staff members, and a lack of motivation to participate in non-academic activities. The role of SLT was also discussed, as it was considered important to the committee, given the incorporation of SD into the SDP. SLT encouraged staff and students to participate in initiatives and activities organised by EkoSkola committees. Gauci (2011) added that the SLT also considered and implemented many of the committee's proposals.

Another important finding presented by Gauci (2011), which will be later on linked to my research was that not all students who form part of the committee liked student leadership roles, since some preferred hands on and practical activities, thus working better when implementing initiatives or someone else's ideas, rather than leading their peers, to convincing them to participate and coming up with new ideas.

Falzon (2015) affirms that EkoSkola helped schools shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning. The program ensured that the democratic values taught to students, along with its promotion of active citizenship both in schools and beyond, led to positive experiences (Falzon, 2015). In interviews with several students attending post-secondary institutions, Falzon (2015) found that most had very positive memories of their time participating in EkoSkola committees. Her findings indicated that EkoSkola continually challenged students, equipping them with skills and competencies necessary for a shift in mentality, perceptions, and attitudes within schools and local communities.

Grixti (2015) conducted his study at one of the resource centres (schools attended by students with severe disabilities) in Malta. He worked with the EkoSkola committee (12 students and 2 teachers) during the first year of the EkoSkola program implementation. After observing the committee and interviewing the head of the school, committee members, students, and educators, he concluded that EkoSkola provided students with opportunities to improve their lives by developing several skills that addressed some of their basic human needs. He also found that, despite all students attending the Centre having severe disabilities, the committee members increased their active participation in decision-making.

Cassar Cordina (2015), in her study with year 3 to year 6 educators (teaching children aged 6-11), sought to measure educators' levels of ESD awareness and knowledge, their attitudes towards ESD, and their willingness to adopt ESD in their classroom settings. 271 questionnaires were collected, and 12 participants were chosen from those who wrote their email addresses on the questionnaires. The results of this study showed that there was an overall positive attitude among educators towards the implementation of ESD within their pedagogies. Half of the participants believed that integrating ESD into the primary school curriculum is crucial for promoting and achieving sustainability. Educators also expressed a desire and willingness to attend ESD training. Cassar Cordina (2015) found that participants felt the need for guidelines and resources (such as simple toolkits and lesson plans) to assist them when teaching important ESD concepts. The research respondents also agreed that ESD needs to be a cross-curricular approach. In Cassar Cordina's (2015) study, only 25% could provide a clear definition of ESD; the others showed partial or no understanding of what ESD entails. Participants were more knowledgeable about global ESD issues than about local ones. Despite having limited knowledge about ESD, according to Cassar Cordina (2015), the participants still recognized the importance of incorporating ESD values and skills into their pedagogies. Educators promoted healthy lifestyles, fostered good listening and expression skills, and supported discussions on cultural, religious, and ethnic diversities.

Cassar Cordina (2015) identified several barriers that the Maltese schools (participating in her research) faced when implementing ESD. These included: lack of training; lack of ESD resources and guidelines; time constraints and pressure due to rigid syllabi and exams; lack of

support from the Ministry of Education; lack of funds and resources; and inadequate school facilities for outdoor teaching and hands-on activities.

McLean (2017) used 207 questionnaires with Form 4 students attending six Maltese secondary schools (state, church, and independent schools) to determine the overall level of general knowledge and awareness about climate change-related issues in a local context. This study focused on two climate change issues: the local transport system and power generation.

Most students viewed traffic as a major issue and agreed that public transportation is vital. 60% of students were aware of vehicle emissions, despite more than half of them being driven to school by their parents. Additionally, they demonstrated a strong awareness of the need to reduce excessive energy use at home and understood the pollutants released by power stations. All students had heard of climate change, with 35% getting information from the internet, 29% from school, 15% from home, and 13% from EkoSkola. Most students who cited EkoSkola as their main source of climate change knowledge attended schools that had previously received the Green Flag award. Another important finding was that lessons focused more on the scientific aspects of climate change than on its social, political, and economic aspects. Therefore, the author argued that even without including the scientific side, climate awareness and literacy could still grow; however, without scientific understanding, knowledge would only provide a partial view of the phenomenon.

In her study, Vassallo (2021) aimed to understand why students choose to join EkoSkola committees, how EkoSkola affected students involved, and what factors influenced students' decisions to continue, start, or stop participating in EkoSkola committees when transitioning from primary to secondary education. A mixed-methods approach was used, including distributing questionnaires to EkoSkola link teachers in schools with students transitioning from primary to middle or secondary school, and conducting group interviews with three EkoSkola committees.

Vassallo (2021) showed that primary school students interested in EkoSkola, despite challenges such as adapting to a new environment and understanding how the systems worked, were intrinsically motivated to participate in the program. The study revealed that teachers' support and effective communication were two key factors promoting student success. However, teachers lacked sufficient time to plan extracurricular activities, even though participation in these activities increased students' sense of belonging and acceptance within the school. According to Vassallo (2021), the school's decision to join the EkoSkola program demonstrates its commitment to empowering students to act in favour of SD and make necessary changes at their school. Participation was open to everyone, with no selection, such as school elections. According to Vassallo's findings, the new committee members did not slow down activities; instead, they brought experiences from other schools and shared new insights on how problems could be solved.

In Vassallo's (2021) study, it was shown that the EkoSkola committee helped new students settle in and feel comfortable at their new school. Older students encouraged the younger ones to take an active role in implementing initiatives and also provided them with space to share their ideas and communicate their concerns. Vassallo (2021) also found that parental

involvement was very important when parents were informed by the EkoSkola committees about the activities and were shown the benefits of these activities. In return, the parents encouraged their children to participate actively in all initiatives and supported the committees in their work. Vassallo identified several barriers to implementing EkoSkola initiatives, including a lack of collaboration from non-committee students, insufficient encouragement of student participation in ESD programs, and limited opportunities for students to express concerns and ideas on transitional processes and decision-making.

The questionnaires and group interviews showed that students' interest in the program came from a personal desire to improve the environment and raise environmental awareness. Students demonstrated considerable enthusiasm and a strong commitment to the program. The author listed three main reasons for joining the EkoSkola committee: the students wanted to do something positive, increase environmental awareness, and take care of the environment.

Vassallo (2021) identified several characteristics that EkoSkola committee members shared and developed while working on projects and initiatives. Students showed interest and enthusiasm for EkoSkola, seeing it as a way to improve their natural and social environment. By participating in committee meetings and project work, students improved critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills, and they learned how to work effectively as a team.

2.7 Students' voice

Students' voices are a widely researched topic in education studies and are emphasized in UN documents such as the Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) and the Roadmap for SDGs (UNESCO, 2014). Children's contributions to a better life are considered fundamental, especially when working to achieve the targets of the 17 SDGs. By developing the necessary skills and competencies across various areas, children's leadership can drive change from school levels to national and international levels. Robinson and Taylor (2007), Mayes et al. (2019), Bergmark and Kostenius (2018), and Hanna (2021) have all highlighted the importance of listening to children's voices, and when their voices are heard, significant positive changes can occur.

The realities children face in complex social environments have always received attention (Fish, 2017). Despite children being heavily influenced by decisions made by their families, educators, and those around them, their voices are rarely heard because they are seen as young, vulnerable, and inexperienced (Manor et al., 2010). Many researchers have shown that in different academic settings, children are typically listened to in a 'tokenistic' way (Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Simmons et al., 2015; Baroutsis et al., 2016) or are 'silenced' (Robinson, 2014; Psaila, 2017). However, Simmons et al. (2015), Baroutsis et al. (2016), and St John and Briel (2017) argued that not only in many circumstances are children listened to in a tokenistic way, but when school audits were introduced in some countries, children's voices were also manipulated and used for such purposes to hold educators more accountable for their work.

In her report for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Robinson (2014) explained that when children are respected and valued at school, they feel important and can build strong, friendly relationships with their educators. This is crucial for maintaining a school climate that is not only conducive to learning but also 'safe'. Additionally, when children feel they are valued, they become more comfortable talking, sharing their opinions, and discussing their concerns (Cook-Sather, 2015; Simmons et al., 2015). Fielding (2004) emphasized the importance of ensuring that all students are listened to, especially in diverse settings where students' voices can be critical. Different ideas can offer varied perspectives on key issues, increasing the likelihood that problems will be resolved more quickly and effectively (Mitra, 2017; Mitra, 2018). Robinson and Taylor (2007) and Mayes et al. (2019) also argue that educators need to be attentive when listening to their students because, when students are truly listened to, they feel empowered and motivated, while marginalized students would not be silenced and oppressed (Cook-Sather, 2015; Ahmadi, 2021).

2.8 Research on students' committees

When a school implements an EkoSkola program, the first step is to establish an EkoSkola committee that represents all students at that school. Although FEE does not provide specific instructions on how these committees are formed, it is important to understand how they represent their peers and how they work to share ideas, concerns, and perspectives on sustainability issues at school and in local communities. Although academic studies of secondary school student committees are quite limited in the literature, the following studies help us understand how student committees influence the school community in different ways.

Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) conducted two case studies, one in Spain and another in the Netherlands, with two secondary schools that had experience with the Eco-school program (the main criteria were: that they participated in the program for a number of years, and according to their national eco-school operators, they have a good implementation of the Eco-school program). The researchers applied multiple qualitative data collection methods, primarily through semi-structured interviews and observations during a five-day visit to each school. The interviewees revealed that, in both schools, students' contributions to eco-school initiatives were limited, and that teachers mostly led them. While the Dutch eco-committee was selected by the teachers based on students' motivation and educational performance, the Spanish school's committee student members were elected by their peers. Another important finding was that despite the Dutch committee representing the whole school, there was little interaction between the committee and the rest of the students. As a result, according to the authors, students who were not on the committee showed very little interest in the activities and perceived them as boring.

In both schools:

- The final decisions were taken by the Eco-school coordinator and head of studies (educator).
- Despite the seven-step framework being followed, students did not lead the program and were engaged in teacher-led initiatives and activities most of the time, and

- The involvement of the school community was very low.

Despite these barriers, according to the research participants, students attending the Spanish school developed more environmentally friendly habits over time than the Dutch students. Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) asserted that these differences resulted from the fact that ESD programs implemented in the Spanish school were more effective than those in the Dutch school, and the Eco-school committee of the Spanish school promoted and encouraged a whole-school approach when organizing events and initiatives.

Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) also identified five components that, in their view, led to the successful implementation of the ESD programs and could have encouraged a whole-school approach.

1. *Activity-based and community co-operative approach.* Apart from hands-on activities, such as tree planting and cleaning, the Spanish students were encouraged to participate in activities related to local issues, including waste management and water pollution prevention.
2. *Adopting a reflective and action-oriented approach to learning.* Students were encouraged to learn about the causes and effects of local environmental problems. The students tried to find solutions with the eco-school coordinator to address these issues, and as a result, they started using recycled plastic bottles to build vertical gardens, making bags from old clothes, and separating waste.
3. *Constant adaptation of the students' learning environment according to their needs and capabilities.* The Spanish teachers organised specific educational activities to enhance interest and ensure learning aligned with students' academic abilities.
4. *Emotional education for teachers.* According to Schröder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020), this fostered a positive school climate, empowering and motivating students to participate in eco-school activities. This positive relationship between students and staff helped encourage students to participate in activities and share their ideas on how issues could be effectively solved.
5. *Application of the eco-school program as an overall educational framework of the school.* The eco-school program implemented in the Spanish school was developed systematically (incorporated into the school development plan). This resulted in the majority of educators being involved in implementing the program within their classrooms. ESD was taught cross-curricular, while the teachers and the student committee encouraged a whole-school approach.

In her study, Sousa (2022) examined how educators at a Portuguese higher education institute (awarded the Green Flag) engaged students and helped them become leaders in creating a more sustainable society. This case study examined how the school committee adopted and implemented the Eco-School program to promote sustainability. This research found that when implementing the eco-school program, activities were linked to the curriculum, and the enactment of sustainable practices was fully integrated into the school community. In all the courses, many academic units integrated sustainability themes, making close connections with the different initiatives suggested and promoted by the eco-school committee. Although this study was conducted in a post-secondary environment (and so, not in a school that

provides compulsory education), the authors identified several strengths and barriers faced by the eco-school committee that are readily applicable to my research. The main strengths and opportunities that emerged from this case study were:

- Different student actions were developed, making the school more environmentally friendly and sustainable;
- Students became more aware of sustainability and environmental issues. Such issues were also affecting their lives.
- Increased opportunities for students coming from different areas of study and interest to work on a similar goal.
- Achieving the SDGs
- There was a change in students' behaviour towards a more sustainable lifestyle.
- Students raised awareness on how to change their behaviour to become more sustainable, even when they were outside of their school environments.
- Eco-school programs were given more importance, and students felt that they were relevant to them; thus, they actively participated in the initiatives.

The main barriers mentioned in this study were:

- Several students, despite the goodwill and intentions, continued to behave unsustainably because there was a lack of initiative and effective involvement in actions
- Some students were difficult to motivate and to encourage their involvement since participation was optional,
- Certain activities could not be done due to time constraints, and students' assessments (examinations and tests) left little space for extracurricular activities.

In another study, Moore (2022) studied a student-led environment and sustainability committee at an independent secondary school in Scotland (students aged 11 to 18). All the committee members were students except for one staff representative. Moore (2022) showed that the committee communicated with the rest of the school through the school bulletin (posted online daily), which was available to students and parents. For this research, a mixed-method approach was used, and two questionnaires were administered. The first was distributed at the committee's inception, and the second five months later. Of a student population of 1,400, only 395 responded to one of the two questionnaires, and only 95 responded to both. The teaching staff also completed the questionnaires. Of 150 staff members, 56 responded to one questionnaire, and 18 responded to both. Several open-ended questions were included to give students the opportunity to share their ideas and perceptions about how they experience and understand their own ability to make decisions, influence outcomes, and have a voice within the committees. The results showed a statistically significant increase in students' perceptions of the student-led committee's impact on student consultation and participation in school. It was clear that students wanted their voices heard and demanded more opportunities to vote and share their opinions at school. Additionally, students sought to improve dialogue, consultation, and communication when important decisions needed to be made. The qualitative data indicated that students requested greater

independence in decision-making, without educator influence, and more opportunities to make informed decisions on various issues. Another key finding was that the greater the impact of students' initiatives, the more positive their opinions and perceptions of the committee's effectiveness at the school. Therefore, Moore (2022) concluded that students' agency becomes more positive when student committees are seen as a key part of school student consultation. When educators and the school leadership team recognized the importance of student-led committees, students saw their benefits, which encouraged them to be more active in decision-making. This research also revealed that, prior to the formation of the students' committee, there was a general lack of opportunities for students to lead committees. This often caused difficulties for even senior students in running meetings, making decisions, and setting agendas. This shows that students serving on committees need training and encouragement to learn to lead their committees and peers in making informed decisions without being influenced by their educators.

Quinn and Owen (2016) conducted case study research at an Australian primary school with 250 students. The school is known for having several students on a leadership committee that represents students in decision-making. They carried out multiple observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus groups with students to better understand the importance of students' voices in their school, both individually and collectively. Although this research does not reflect the realities of all schools, Quinn and Owen found that school elections may seem democratic because students can choose their representatives, but they can also be quite unfair and even anti-democratic. This is because elections tend to favour the most popular students—those who are part of the majority and often possess the personal and cultural capital that makes them more attractive candidates. As a result, minority students had much fewer opportunities to be elected and to have their voices represented on student committees. In this context, students from minority groups were rarely represented, and their opinions and perceptions were often overlooked.

Based on their observations, Quinn and Owen noticed concerning issues with how students were represented. Often, those on the committee tried to limit their peers' participation and silence them rather than encourage greater involvement. As a result, these committees, instead of representing their peers, were working for themselves—seeking more attention from the school management, trying to elevate their own opinions, and simultaneously suppressing differing views. This shift of power to student representatives created new and complex issues that are not always easy to understand. This phenomenon was also discussed in Finnerty's (2024) thesis, where she found that in a predominantly white high school, indigenous students were repeatedly silenced and not represented by the school's student committee. Finnerty (2024) emphasizes that democratic schools should have committees that ensure all students are represented, including those from diverse and minority groups. Therefore, committees should not be elected; instead, students interested in participating should be able to do so at any time without barriers.

However, Luti-Mallei (2024) discovered that when students were not given the opportunity to choose who represented them, they felt marginalized and oppressed. Luti-Mallei (2024) collected data through personally administered questionnaires distributed to educators and

students (14-17 years old) attending secondary schools in Machakos Sub-county, Kenya. The educators included teachers, deputy principals, and principals. She studied the impact of student participation in the election of student leaders and the formation of committees that represented them. The results showed that when students were allowed to vote for their representatives, collaboration and interaction between students and educators improved significantly. According to Luti-Mallei (2024), because the representatives were chosen by students rather than by deputy principals or principals, the students felt more respected, valued, and acknowledged, and as a result, behaved better. Another finding was that when students elected their own leaders, they were more likely to respect them, ask for their help when needed, and trust them to enforce school policies. Luti-Mallei (2024) also found that when educators controlled and regulated elections (which mostly occurred in state schools), student leaders were seen and described as the administration's mouthpiece. This led to difficulties for students in accepting the leadership of elected student leaders, and students felt that they were not well represented, as their leaders could not adequately communicate their emotional, moral, and intellectual needs to their school deputy principals and principals.

2.9 Theories of students' voice

Over the past thirty years, interest in the importance and influence of children's voices and participation in decision-making has increased significantly within research and academic communities. Several theories have sought to measure the value of students' voices and participation; however, the four most prominent and widely cited theories in the literature are: Hart's Ladder of Participation theory (Hart, 1992), Shier's Pathways to Participation Theory (Shier, 2001), Lundy's Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007), and Mitra's Model of Students' Voice and Participation (Mitra, 2008). In this section, I will present these four models, along with studies that have used them as their theoretical frameworks and have contributed to understanding how they can be effectively applied in research.

Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992) describes eight levels of children's participation, ranging from the first level, which involves non-participation and manipulation, to the highest level, where adults share decision-making with children—both when adults initiate discussions seeking change and when children propose change. Figure 3 illustrates Hart's symbolic ladder showing progression from level 1 to level 8.

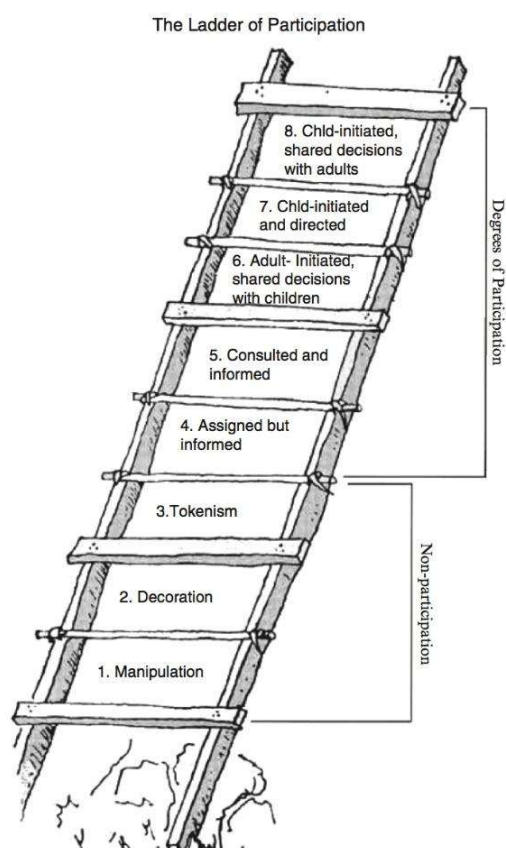


Figure 3. Hart's ladder of participation. Image adapted from (Hart, 1991, p.8)

According to Wetzelhütter and Bacher (2015), Perry-Hazan and Bauml (2023), and Pardali et al. (2025), Hart's theory is frequently used to raise awareness about the difference between tokenism and genuine participation. It has been employed in literature to explore and evaluate the extent to which educational institutions are willing to listen to students' voices and how educators facilitate children's involvement in decision-making (Pardali et al., 2025). This model has also been applied in the design of training programs for educators to assess and reflect on the quality of children's participation in decision-making (Wetzelhütter, 2015; Koch, 2018).

Pardali et al. (2025) conducted research in two Norwegian and three Estonian schools. They held nine semi-structured focus group discussions to examine student participation in decision-making using Hart's ladder of participation. The results showed that when teachers listened to children—for example, when children requested short breaks due to tiredness or when teachers shared their class timetable and allowed breaks for physical activities—students appreciated it and felt closer to their teachers. Students also believed that some teachers were resistant to giving extra time for physical activities, while others were more inclined to do so when most students asked for more PAL (Physical Activity Learning) activities. They suggested that involving students in decision-making could enhance their learning and engagement, as some physical activities were perceived as boring, and teachers did not consult them when selecting activities to improve their skills and enjoyment. The study also found that older students were more likely to be listened to and had more choices in the activities they participated in. Using Hart's ladder of participation, the researchers identified

areas where teachers offered little room for student involvement and others where students were more active in decision-making. These experiences helped the researchers reflect on and identify the main factors behind the varying opportunities for student participation, including time constraints, limited resources, and teachers' lack of confidence. The study also provided educators with opportunities to reflect on the physical activities organized at their schools.

In another study, Koch (2018) conducted a drawing-elicited interview with five Danish children aged 3-5 years. This research took place at a Danish public ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) institution, and data were also collected from a group interview with two adult professionals. The study focused on children's expressions, examining how children articulated their perspectives, views, and impressions, as well as on adult approximations, which were adults' representations of children's views. The research showed that when the researcher shared her power with the children, they took the initiative and sometimes experimented with her control and authority. She allowed this because it helped children express themselves more effectively and share their ideas more comfortably.

While children drew their favourite adult professionals and shared stories about activities with these adults, Koch (2018) aimed, through a participative approach, to move from the fourth rung (assigned but informed) to the fifth (consulted and informed), and eventually to the sixth rung (initiated, shared decisions with children). By improvising questions (conducting an improvised interview), the researcher empowered children to participate in decision-making during play. This experience helped the researcher realize that, for adults to provide children with opportunities to share their perspectives, they need to approach children with an open, curious mind, engaging in play activities that allow children to share their views and make their own choices.

Shier's five-level participation model (Sheir, 2001) emphasizes adults' responsibilities in ensuring children's participation and highlights educational institutions' commitments to provide more opportunities for children to engage in decision-making processes. In the literature, Shier's model has been used as a practical tool for self-assessment in teacher training courses (Shaik, 2022) and for developing pedagogical documentation in early childhood education that promotes participatory learning (Hardison, 2020).

Sheir (2001) demonstrated how the five-level participation model progresses from the first level, where children are only listened to, to the fifth level, which focuses on shared power and responsibility between adults and children in decision-making.

Level 1: Adults listen to children's ideas and opinions.

Level 2: Children are encouraged to express their views openly without fear.

Level 3: Adults consider children's suggestions, perceptions, and ideas.

Level 4: Children are actively engaged in decision-making processes.

Level 5: Power and responsibilities in decision-making are shared with children.

(Sheir, 2001)

At each level, reflective questions are posed to evaluate the degree of children's involvement and whether educators are truly supporting children's participation (Sheir, 2001).

Shaik (2022) demonstrated how Shier's model could be applied with ten South African student teachers in the Western Cape, in a project that promoted participatory pedagogies. The participants, who answered open-ended questions in focus group interviews, revealed that although they were eager to listen to children, they lacked sufficient training to create spaces where children could express themselves. This study also showed that children were inexperienced in voicing their opinions in a classroom context, since the teachers' pedagogies were predominantly teacher-centred. The participants attributed this to the strict, prescribed curriculum, which pressured teachers to achieve certain outcomes within limited timeframes. Additionally, the mentor teachers were also uncomfortable giving students opportunities to voice their opinions and participate in discussions, fearing they would lose control of the class. Shier's model served as a tool for participants to reflect on how they could provide more opportunities for children to participate in decision-making and share their ideas and perspectives, ultimately enhancing teaching and learning.

In her doctoral thesis, Hardison (2020) used Shier's model to develop an online questionnaire for thirteen early childhood educators practicing the Reggio Emilia approach across different institutions in the U.S. Using a thematic analysis, it emerged that educators recognized the importance of children's perspectives, but they interpreted meaningful participation in different ways. Through pedagogical documentation, these educators aimed to understand children's perspectives and the extent of their initiative in class activities. This study, inspired by Shier's model, revealed that educators hold varying perspectives on documenting children's learning, leading to different assessments with predetermined outcomes. Therefore, Shier's model showed that although educators may have perceived children as actively involved in decision-making and choice, the actual level of participation depended on how pedagogical documentation was conducted.

Lundy's model of participation (Lundy, 2007) frequently references Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007). Lundy (2007) describes four key elements for meaningful participation: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.

Space: Children should be given opportunities to express their ideas and opinions.

Voice: Children should find it easy and feel comfortable sharing their views.

Audience: Children's ideas and perceptions are listened to.

Influence: Adults act on and appreciate children's ideas and perspectives.

Kennan, Brady, and Forkan (2019) and Molloy (2022) attest that policymakers widely refer to this model because it ensures that legal strategies, policies, and proposed practices align with education law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12). Vilgeus and Kneck (2025), Correia and Aguiar (2020), and Shaik (2023) demonstrated how this model can be easily applied in classrooms, school debates, and when drafting new policies that affect children's well-being.

Kenna et al. (2019) demonstrated how Lundy's model was applied in Irish children's welfare and protection services. They aimed to explore the extent of children's participation during the program's implementation. The researchers examined fifty-three HIQA (Health Information and Quality Authority) inspection reports and questionnaires with Tusla staff and other professionals working with families. Lundy's model revealed that although professionals believed they listened to children, in reality, children were significantly influenced by their relationships with the professionals working with them—specifically, whether children felt comfortable talking to the professionals and whether they were given enough space to voice themselves.

In another study, Vilgeus and Kneck (2025) used Lundy's model to examine the participation in decision-making of 12 girls (aged 10-15) who practiced sports after school, including athletics, basketball, and football. The researchers applied this model to understand how often the girls had opportunities to share their views with their coaches and peers. Ultimately, they found that this model was insufficient because, although the girls felt their coach played a crucial role in encouraging participation and creating safe spaces, group dynamics also significantly influenced their involvement. The coaches' determination alone was insufficient in this context, as teammates' support for their peers' contributions, the higher abilities and performance of some players, and the resulting boost in self-esteem led these players to feel more important and influential when decisions were made. In this regard, the level of *influence* outlined in Lundy's model was not achieved.

Mitra's model of student voice and participation (Mitra, 2008), presents three levels of students' voice and participation:

Level 1: This is the beginner level, where students mainly express their opinions about school and social issues.

Level 2: Students learn how to collaborate with their teachers and local authorities to identify issues and initiate reforms.

Level 3: Students assume leadership roles in identifying main issues through research and inquiry, and implement suitable solutions.

Mitra (2008) explains that various factors influence progress from one level to the next. These include the school climate, students' human and cultural capital, the leadership style used by school leaders, and students' motivation to become change agents. Although other factors may also play a role in empowering students to express themselves, these are the most discussed in the literature (Lyons and Brasof, 2020; Lyons, Brasof, and Baron, 2020; Finer-Rosenbluh, Berry, and Ryan, 2023; Strachan, 2024; Wright, Tang, and Hassan, 2024).

Lyons and Brasof (2020) reviewed 20 studies on student voice conducted in high schools and accessed via the Web of Science Citation Index. Their research aimed to identify various organizational mechanisms that encourage and support successful student voice initiatives. The authors used both Mitra's (2008) theory of student voice and participation and Mitchell and Sachney's (2011) theory of capacity building to determine whether organizational mechanisms that allowed or inhibited students' participation were present or absent,

whether they encouraged students' influence on policy making and school practices, how the representation of students from diverse groups (including those with different cultural backgrounds and low social strata) was promoted, and how students' agency was stimulated. The study revealed that leadership opportunities were predominantly offered to students considered economically and socially privileged. Conversely, students from culturally diverse backgrounds who qualified for free lunches were frequently ignored and excluded. Using Mitra's (2008) theory of student voice and participation, the authors identified five organizational mechanisms that encourage student leadership:

1. Students researching the environmental and social issues experienced at their school, and to be able to think critically and make informed decisions to solve these school issues. This empowers students to lead their peers and educators and to drive sustainability changes.
2. Consistency: When meetings are organised, students need to be invited every time. Lyons and Brasof (2020) emphasized that initiatives need to be sustained even if grant funding for a community partnership ends or if a teacher who initiated these opportunities leaves the school or retires; they should continue with other educators.
3. Governance structure: When students are given leadership roles, they need to be given the possibility to vote and lead changes, and not silenced so as not to disrupt the status quo. Lyons and Brasof found instances in which student committees were asked, for example, to choose the type of food provided for lunches; however, Lyons and Brasof (2020) noted that very few studies have documented how students contribute to better pedagogies and are involved in constructive evaluation of teachers' work.
4. Recognition: In many studies reviewed by Lyons and Brasof (2020), many post-secondary student leadership programs were organised after school hours. In the absence of recognition (financial support or credit for food and community services), students from socially deprived families were discouraged from participating, as they preferred working to earn money rather than participating in such initiatives.
5. Group makeup: The study had revealed a number of factors that encouraged or inhibited students' leadership and voices. These included classroom sizes, which were often too large, inhibiting or making it difficult for students to voice their opinions, decreasing student engagement, and weakening the sense of classroom community. Lyons and Brasof (2020) suggested that student groups should consist of a ratio of five to ten students to one adult to increase the likelihood of successful student engagement in discussions, with the adult serving as a moderator or facilitator rather than a leader or dominant participant.

In another study, Lyons, Brasof, and Baron (2020) surveyed 280 students from 9 US high schools to understand a school's capacity to build student leadership. Then, by using open-ended narrative questions, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, the authors asked a number of students to share and interpret the quantitative data gathered from the surveys. Mitra's theory helped the authors identify eight mechanisms (derived from data and qualitative findings) that schools can employ to enhance student leadership. These eight mechanisms were: pedagogy, relationships, radical collegiality, recognition, group markup,

consistency, research, and governance structure. Most of the mechanisms described in this research were similar to those previously reported (Lyons and Brasof, 2020). Regarding radical collegiality, Lyons, Brasof, and Baron (2020) explained that students' voices and leadership are encouraged when a dialogic school culture is nurtured. While pedagogies need to focus on providing opportunities for students to develop communication and collaboration skills, they should also promote listening and learning to appreciate differences in opinions and perceptions regarding various social justice issues.

In Australia, Finer-Rosenbluh, Berry, and Ryan (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers who had previously participated in a participatory action research-based professional development program. This professional development was designed to help teachers refine their pedagogy based on student perception survey results. The authors employed Mitra's theory as a framework to examine how student perception surveys can serve as valuable tools for teachers to enhance not only their teaching methods but also their communication with students and to better understand students' concerns and difficulties in their school lives. Using data gathered from interviews, research projects, reflective notes, and artifacts, the researchers demonstrated how Mitra's theory guided the school community in using the students' voice-based assessment initiative to modify practices and foster teachers' personal growth. This approach increased opportunities for teachers to listen to students' thoughts and perspectives, promoted active listening, and helped teachers regain their agency, mainly when student perception surveys were used to exert accountability, control, and political influence. When surveys were used to control and for accountability, neither students (due to survey fatigue) nor teachers truly benefited from these surveys, despite the original intention to provide students with a platform to voice their opinions (Finer-Rosenbluh, Berry, and Ryan, 2023).

Choice of theoretical framework

For this thesis, Mitra's (2008) model of student voice and participation was preferred over the other models for four main reasons:

1. Mitra's model emphasizes children's empowerment and how they become agents of change. Other models prioritize how adults facilitate children's participation and create spaces for their voices. Mitra's model highlights the progression of children from level 1 (passively sharing opinions) to level 3 (leading and managing change).
2. Mitra's model presents a gradual, continuous process (moving from Level 1 to Level 3) and does not show a sequence of separate stages like other models. The three levels also illustrate a gradual development of children's leadership skills and their ability to voice opinions and participate in decision-making. This greatly helped to identify how the EkoSkola committees have developed their skills and abilities to become empowered and progress from Level 1.
3. This model was developed through various research studies involving children, which contributed to improvements in school policies (Mitra, 2004) and school climates (Mitra, 2006).
4. Mitra's model is also student-centred and does not emphasize adult contributions and initiatives to enhance children's participation, as seen in Lundy's (2007), Sheir's (2001),

and Hart's (1992) models. Instead, this model highlights children's involvement and their ability to empower themselves to lead change.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed various local and international literature related to ESD, Eco-schools, and students' voices. Students' voices are a fundamental tool for the successful implementation of Eco-school programs, and the more students are empowered and listened to, the greater the likelihood that ESD programs will foster the necessary changes in people's attitudes toward sustainable development. The influence of children on adults and the implementation of ESD programs in adult education have empowered citizens to find suitable solutions to social and environmental problems, rather than leaving this task solely to politicians or policymakers. This research study will focus on four Maltese eco-school committees identified as successful in implementing their EkoSkola program. This literature review also provides a better understanding of how eco-school committees should operate to promote sustainable development. The following chapter outlines the methodology for collecting the research data and provides a detailed explanation of how the data were analyzed and categorized into key themes. Important ethical considerations will be discussed, given the qualitative data gathered from children and educators through focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the design of this research, including the entire data collection and analysis process. As a reminder, the aims of this research were:

- I) To understand the extent to which students' voices within EkoSkola committees were being heard.
- II) To investigate whether EkoSkola programs genuinely gave children the opportunity to lead educators, peers, and parents in driving the necessary changes in behaviours and lifestyles that promoted sustainability.
- III) To identify common key personal qualities that EkoSkola committee members had to effectively participate in decision-making and lead their peers in ESD projects.
- IV) To assess the effectiveness and success of the strategies used by EkoSkola committees in implementing EkoSkola projects.
- V) to explore the leadership styles adopted by different SLTs (School leadership teams) and assess whether some leadership styles better empowered and encouraged EkoSkola committees to lead and implement their initiatives.

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on the strategies used by the EkoSkola committees of the four participating secondary schools to implement their projects within their schools and local communities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads of schools (HOSs), link teachers (except for one school, where there were more than one link teacher, and a focus group was conducted with them), and the EkoSkola teachers of the four participating committees. Additionally, the four EkoSkola committees participated in four separate focus groups (one for each committee), during which open-ended questions were posed to gather data.

The research employed an interpretivist approach, which aligned with the methodological framework. The four EkoSkola committees shared ideas and perspectives on how they carried out projects that raised awareness of environmental and social issues, addressed these problems, and guided their peers, educators, and parents toward pro-SD (Sustainable Development) changes. This approach was significant because I aimed to examine the extent to which students felt empowered, how their voices influenced peers, educators, and the local community (including parents), and to identify the personal qualities and skills that committee members possessed and applied in effectively implementing their SD projects. In this way, this research also aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding EkoSkola committees, including their personal qualities, the skills they gained through program implementation, and the barriers they encountered at school and in local contexts while carrying out their initiatives.

3.2 Research paradigm

One of the main goals of this research was to understand how much educators, SLTs, parents, and local communities listen to students' voices in EkoSkola committees. This study also aimed to examine whether ESD programs, such as the EkoSkola program, give students opportunities to lead their school community and involve parents in making the necessary changes to encourage sustainable behaviours. From an ontological standpoint, interpretivism helped me see the social world through the perspectives of my research participants rather than as an outsider. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) explained that, since human behaviour is intentional, people interpret the situations they experience in different contexts and at different times, and then act based on these interpretations. In this context, as a researcher, I wanted to understand how students interpreted their experiences while working on their EkoSkola projects. Therefore, the main focus was to explore participants' meanings and experiences across various social settings (school, community, and national levels). My aim was not to measure or predict behaviours but to interpret how participants (both students and educators) evaluated the effectiveness and success of the strategies used to implement EkoSkola projects and their level of involvement in decision-making. Using an interpretivist approach, I believed that the realities in the four participant schools where the committees worked on their ESD projects were socially constructed rather than objective or fixed. Thus, I sought to understand the experiences, perspectives, and meanings of: the students on the committee, the link teachers who supported them, the EkoSkola teachers who helped the committees connect with Nature Trust, FEE Malta, and offered necessary advice when needed, and the HOSs who observed their respective committees attempting to implement projects to bring about needed changes at their schools. Each school had its own realities and needs, and, based on the environmental audit conducted by the EkoSkola committees, each had to identify areas to focus on to create a more sustainable environment. By interpreting the participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions, I wanted to determine whether students' voices were heard in a tokenistic way or valued (and in which contexts) by their respective SLTs, school communities, and local communities.

From the very beginning, I was more interested in participants' context-specific insights than in generalizable results. Since EkoSkola programs focus on the needs of the school community where they are implemented, EkoSkola committees strive to voice their perspectives to promote sustainability messages and to use various strategies and approaches to better involve their school and local communities in making the needed changes. The advantage of adopting an interpretivist paradigm in this educational research was that the data collected from the four student committees, HOSs, link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers enabled me to gain rich, detailed insights into the participants' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. Additionally, adopting the interpretivist paradigm helped me understand how ESD practices were shaped by social and institutional contexts, thereby building new conceptual understandings grounded in real-life experiences (Zhao and Bailey, 2013). According to Zhao and Bailey (2013) and Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), this approach gives participants' perspectives value and provides them with opportunities to voice their opinions and thoughts throughout the research process.

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) explained that a limitation of an interpretivist approach is that research findings may be influenced by how the researcher interprets participants' discourse and by personal biases stemming from the researcher's positionality. To address this limitation, I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups as the primary research tools. By asking participants pre-prepared interview questions and then follow-up questions to understand better the discourse (Willis, 2007; Dika, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Privitera, 2017), I was able to minimize personal assumptions, especially during data analysis, and thereby gave participants opportunities to explain their perceptions and ideas about the themes and issues being discussed in greater detail (Willis, 2007; Dika, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Privitera, 2017).

Another limitation was that the results and findings could not be easily generalized to other settings, as they were specific to the context (Willis, 2007; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). In my analysis and interpretation of the results, I attempted to compare findings across the four participating schools, despite the differing contexts. However, Zhao and Bailey (2013) explained that this is typical of all qualitative, interpretive studies, since the goal of researchers is not to generalize the findings but to understand participants' experiences, perspectives, and ideas, as in this study, which was drawn from four distinct school environments with varying experiences of EkoSkola program implementation. Willis (2007) and Zhao and Bailey (2013) explained that positivist researchers view the interpretivist approach as less credible because it often lacks rigorous scientific methods and numerical data. Nonetheless, it is valued by researchers (Dika, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Privitera, 2017; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018) as an opportunity for participants who usually have limited space to voice their perspectives and demonstrate how they struggle to participate in decision-making processes and to achieve the set goals as they implement their projects within their schools and local communities.

This research also used an inductive approach to build theories (and not test existing ones) from the findings and data collected. Johnson and Christensen (2020) explained that adopting an interpretivist focus yields detailed qualitative data without imposing predefined categories. In addition, an inductive process helps identify patterns, themes, and relationships that emerge from the research findings (Maxwell, 2013; Johnson and Christensen, 2020; Lichtman, 2023). Lichtman (2023) argues that, since an interpretivist focus develops an empathetic, contextual understanding of how participants interpret their world, an inductive process builds new concepts or theories grounded in these meanings and patterns.

Tjora (2018), Johnson and Christensen (2020), and Lichtman (2023) showed how an inductive approach is considered a bottom-up approach by following a three-step process:

1. Collecting detailed qualitative data with the use of interviews, observations, or other qualitative tools.
2. Looking for patterns and themes. Such patterns, themes, and relationships emerge naturally without any influence from pre-existing theories.
3. Developing theories and concepts. From the identified patterns, several concepts, propositions, or theoretical explanations are formulated to make sense of the observed phenomena.

The following section will demonstrate how this research followed this approach, showing how data were collected and analyzed, and, ultimately, how several concepts were developed to understand the extent to which students were allowed to participate in decision-making.

3.3 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach over two years, involving the EkoSkola committees of four secondary schools. My data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data were gathered from various sources (committees, EkoSkola teachers, link teachers, and HOSs), enabling comparison of experiences, views, perceptions, thoughts, and ideas across the four committees' lived realities.

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

In this research study, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from educators. Every interview lasted around 45 minutes, and all were audio-recorded. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) explained that semi-structured interviews are widely used in social research because they combine predetermined questions with the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to explore and learn about topics that emerge during the interviews. Willis (2007) explained that by using pre-determined questions, the researcher can obtain more comparable data from participants who come from different contexts, but at the same time, semi-structured interviews can give more unique insights and perspectives since the interviews become more conversational and free-flowing (rather than rigid and standardized as in structured interviews). Flick (2018) states that this method helps researchers build rapport and trust with research participants by encouraging openness and richer responses (and, in turn, richer findings). When exploring complex issues, having participants feel comfortable responding and open to discussing them helps with better understanding, especially if the researcher is not familiar with them. Additionally, according to Flick (2018), the researcher must understand the behaviours and experiences of the research participants across different contexts and situations. I feel that these interviews helped all the participant educators reflect on the support (or lack thereof) they provide to the EkoSkola committees and on their roles in helping these committees successfully and effectively implement the EkoSkola programs and initiatives.

Using semi-structured interviews, I explored how the HOSs perceived the role of the committees in driving pro-sustainability change within their schools and local communities. The discussions with the HOSs also helped me understand the importance they give to their schools' EkoSkola committees. I also tried to explore how much these HOSs felt the EkoSkola committee's voices were really heard and followed, and to determine the level of participation in decision-making these EkoSkola committees reached while the projects and initiatives were implemented. While interviewing the link teachers, we reflected on their role as supporters of the committees, and the discussions helped me understand whether the committee's voices were really heard and given importance not only by their peers but also by their educators and SLTs.

The four EkoSkola teachers interviewed reflected on the work of the EkoSkola committees in promoting their ESD programs and implementing sustainability initiatives within their schools. They discussed their experiences working with the participant committees, specifically how the committees behaved when facing barriers and how they persuaded and motivated their peers, parents, and educators to adopt a sustainable lifestyle. Additionally, all the interviews helped me understand how the qualities, attributes, and personal characteristics of committee members not only helped them overcome the many barriers they faced during project implementation but also contributed to bringing about necessary changes to the social and physical environment of their schools.

According to Dika, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Privitera (2017), Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), and Johnson and Christensen (2020), researchers experience several advantages when conducting semi-structured interviews. There include:

- Flexibility- Unexpected topics and themes that emerge during discussions can be reviewed in more detail, thereby providing answers (for the researcher) to unclear responses (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). In fact, during the interviews, I asked additional questions, especially to the HOSs, to better understand whether these HOSs created opportunities for EkoSkola committees to share their concerns and ideas, and how many opportunities were given to these committees to participate in and lead decision-making processes.
- Depth of data- Flick (2018) explained that semi-structured interviews yield rich, qualitative findings that reveal participants' thoughts, motivations, and feelings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) added that while participants discuss their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, they also have the opportunity to reflect on their behaviours and the roles they have in making a better environment. In this research, participants reflected on the type of support they provided to students and whether it could have been better.
- Contextual understanding- Bryman (2016) discussed the advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews to help the researcher understand more about how the participants' experiences and behaviours are shaped by their social and environmental backgrounds.
- Conversations that encourage trust and rapport- Robson and McCartan (2016) affirmed that since semi-structured interviews promote discussion, participants feel more open to sharing their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, and are more comfortable engaging in further discussion when asked follow-up questions.

Bryman (2016), Robson and McCartan (2016), and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) also listed several disadvantages of utilizing semi-structured interviews in educational research studies.

- Time-consuming- conducting the interviews and transcribing them takes a lot of time (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Additionally, all interviews with the link teachers were time-limited. The interviews were held during their free time between lessons. Although all the educators were very helpful and supportive, they were cautious about the time to avoid being late for their next class. This might explain why,

at times, the participants responded briefly, and I had to ask more questions to encourage them to speak more.

- Potential researcher's bias- The researcher can react to a participant's response, using particular tones, facial expressions, and phrasing sentences, which can easily influence the participant's response (Robson and McCarton, 2016). Although non-verbal communication and gestures may occur naturally, Bryman (2016) emphasised that the researcher should be cautious to limit them as much as possible.
- Complex data analysis- The findings and data need to be coded carefully and interpreted accordingly (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Such interpretations could be subjective, as the interviewer's beliefs and biases could influence how findings (what participants say or do) are interpreted. Creswell and Creswell (2018) also emphasized that since qualitative data deals with behaviours, emotions, and discourse, these can all be interpreted in different ways. This is because a statement or action might have different meanings that strongly depend on the researcher's point of view.
- Limited comparability- since the researcher asks questions in different ways and at times even in different sequences, sometimes it is difficult to systematically compare the answers. Further questions are asked to improve the researcher's understanding, and sometimes, while answering these questions, the interviewees may also answer other questions planned for later in the interview. This also happened in the interviews that I conducted with the educators. Although all the participants were asked all the pre-determined questions, on some occasions, the sequence (of the pre-determined questions) was changed as participants were answering more than one question at the same time and developed their discussion in a different way from other interviewees.
- Small group size- Since the interviews focus on participants' experiences, perspectives, and feelings, there is a stronger focus on the depth of data collected. Therefore, fewer participants were engaged in the study, thus limiting the generalizability of the results (Flick, 2018).

Another limitation in my research occurred when I interviewed the HOSs in their offices. Teachers and students frequently knocked on the door to talk with them, and their office phone often rang. There were also times when the interviews were interrupted because someone urgently needed to speak with them. Additionally, due to their various commitments, meeting with HOSs outside of school hours was very difficult; therefore, all interviews were conducted during working hours. Although I asked the HOSs from the very beginning to inform me whenever they needed to stop the interview, there were moments when I felt they might have been more focused on what was happening at their school than on what we were discussing. This limitation could only be addressed by conducting the interviews outside of school and after school hours. However, as mentioned earlier, this was not easy to do, and all the interviews were conducted during working hours.

3.3.2 Focus groups

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, I also conducted five focus groups. Each focus group lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. I decided to conduct the focus group with the

link teachers due to time constraints and difficulties finding time slots for one-to-one interviews with the four participants. Kellett and Ding (2004), and Creswell and Creswell (2018) have argued that focus groups are very effective research tools for collecting data, especially from children, due to several benefits. Some of these benefits include:

- Encourage participation- Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that students, particularly the younger ones, tend to prefer talking in groups rather than in one-to-one interviews. Kellet and Ding (2004) affirmed that this is because they feel more comfortable talking and expressing themselves, especially with an adult they do not know, within a group rather than alone. Creswell and Creswell (2018) also affirmed that focus groups reduce students' anxiety, as at times children and adolescents tend to feel intimidated by individual interviews, especially (as stated earlier) when interviewed by someone who is new to them. Being in a group is less intimidating, and students could feel more secure.
- Focus groups stimulate discussions- Robson and McCartan (2016) pointed out that when children listen to each other sharing their ideas, thoughts, and perspectives, they tend to recall their own experiences and tend to express their thoughts more clearly.
- Generate richer data- For Punch and Oancea (2014), when students interact with each other, ideas are built collectively, and so they are able to synthesize deeper insights.
- Positive peer influence: When students see their peers engaged in discussions, they get more motivated to share their ideas and perceptions. While conducting the focus groups, I noticed that when someone started to share ideas and views, others immediately engaged, discussing their opinions and sharing experiences from past initiatives and successes.
- Revealing shared experiences- The discussions among the students helped in the identification of common thoughts, beliefs, behaviours, challenges, and barriers encountered. During the focus groups, the students were eager to share their positive experiences, common dreams, and the barriers they encountered at school and outside, when parents or local community members were not always on board with their initiatives.
- Enables efficient data collection- Punch and Oancea (2014) explained that when focus groups are used to collect data, a lot of views, ideas, thoughts, and perceptions are gathered at once, thus making the process more efficient than individual interviews.
- Students' empowerment- Robson and McCartan (2016) and Denscombe (2014) emphasised that focus groups give a lot of opportunities to students to express their ideas, opinions, and experiences in an environment where they feel safe (because they are within a group that shares similar thoughts, likes, dreams and ideas), knowing that throughout the discussion, their peers can support them when needed.

Apart from the benefits, I also considered some limitations of focus groups compared to one-to-one interviews when conducting the four focus groups with the four EkoSkola committees. Although these limitations can also occur in focus groups with adults, they may be more pronounced in those with children. These include:

- Dominant voices— Kellett and Ding (2004) as well as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) asserted that due to their enthusiasm and strong personality, some participants tend to feel and become more comfortable during the discussions to talk about their experiences and thoughts, dominating most of the discussions, and as a result, the quieter students end up contributing less. During the focus groups, although I was happy listening to the enthusiastic students talk about their committee's work, successes, and future initiatives, I often tried to ask the quietest students questions to involve them more. In this way, I tried to involve all the students on the committee who were present for the focus group.
- Peer pressure—Robson and McCartan (2016) emphasized that the focus group moderator needs to be aware that some students tend to conform to the opinions and views of those who have dominant voices, and therefore, they refrain from sharing their honest views and opinions on the subject being discussed. Although this is not easy to control as a moderator, I tried asking additional questions to the quietest students, encouraging them to share their thoughts on what was discussed and whether they had other views or ideas about the subject.
- Concerns about confidentiality — Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed this issue, which could affect participants sharing personal experiences and past issues. I was aware of this limitation, especially when students discussed their SLTs, HOSs, or challenges with parents and peers. To help them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about school concerns, I reminded them that their confidentiality would always be protected and that what was discussed in the focus group would not be shared with SLTs or HOSs.
- Complex data analysis—Since group discussions generate a lot of data that sometimes overlaps, it becomes more challenging to analyze. However, with thematic analysis (presented later in this chapter), I overcame this problem: after transcribing the recordings, I coded the findings and grouped them into distinct themes.
- Participants' attendance varied — not all committee members were present for the focus groups, as some were sick or involved in other activities and unable to attend. Generally, for various reasons, not all committee members participated in every meeting throughout the school year. As a result, it was always challenging to find the ideal time to conduct focus groups when all members were together.

3.3.3 My positionality

My positionality as Head of School influenced both the data generation and analysis processes in different ways. My experience serving in Maltese schools helped me build stronger rapport with my research participants, particularly HOSs and educators, who may have felt more at ease discussing the realities and challenges of implementing the EkoSkola program with a researcher familiar with the different educational contexts. My positionality also helped me gain a deep understanding of the institutional structures, leadership roles, and practical constraints that influence student participation in decision-making within their schools.

My professional role may have also introduced limitations and power dynamics into the research process. The participants may have moderated their responses due to perceptions stemming from my

leadership position. Additionally, my familiarity with school contexts may have led to assumptions during data interpretation. To address these potential limitations, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, helping me reflect on how my experiences, beliefs, and professional background could have influenced my interpretation of participants' perspectives. Therefore, I tried to ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' discourse rather than shaped by my personal assumptions and experiences.

3.4 Data collection

3.4.1 Research context

This research study was conducted in Malta. Compulsory education in Malta spans the ages of 5 to 16 years. While primary schooling spans from 5 to 11 years, middle/secondary schooling spans from 12 to 16 years.

Students attending Maltese state schools start middle school at age 12 and, after two years, progress to secondary school. Church schools have significantly fewer students at the secondary level and operate as complete schools; therefore, their students' ages range from 12 to 16 years. All state schools are co-educational, whereas some church schools are co-educational and others are single-gender.

This research was conducted in four schools: two girls' church schools, one state middle school, and one state secondary school. While providing a brief description of the schools located in different areas around Malta, the names of the schools are fictitious to protect their anonymity.

Kemmuna Secondary School is located in the Northern West Region of Malta. The school has around 364 students. It is a co-educational middle state school, and the catchment area covers the North-West regions of Malta. Since starting the Ekoskola program, the school has been awarded two green flags.

Filfla Secondary School is situated in the southeastern part of Malta. It has a student population of around 950. It is a co-educational secondary state school, with its catchment area located in the southeast of Malta. Since starting the EkoSkola program, the school has been awarded three green flags.

Gaudos Secondary School is located in the southern part of Malta. It has about 473 students. This school is a girls' church school run by nuns. Since starting the Ekoskola program, the school has earned five green flags.

Melita Secondary School is situated in the Port region of Malta. It has a student population of 480. This girls' church school is also managed by nuns. Since beginning the EkoSkola project, the school has been awarded five green flags.

3.4.2 Choosing the participants

The four participating schools were purposive samples. A purposive sample consists of participants specifically chosen because they are most relevant to the study's purpose (Wellington, 2015; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018; Flick, 2018). Flick (2018) emphasized the importance of purposive sampling when specific lived experiences and knowledge are required. Scott and Usher (2011) added that focused data enhances relevance and richness, as participants bring relevant experiences and insights that enrich the discussion. Another benefit of using purposive sampling is that, when time is limited, it helps avoid wasting resources on participants who might not be knowledgeable or experienced in the subject. Since this research aimed to explore the strategies used by EkoSkola committees to implement their SD programs, selecting schools that were experienced in running EkoSkola projects and whose committees were known for effectively expressing their views publicly and within their schools, sharing their experiences and opinions, could have better supported answering the research questions. New, inexperienced committees in schools with little experience in running EkoSkola initiatives still hold perceptions and opinions about EkoSkola; however, they lack experience in implementing SD projects and managing school environmental and social issues.

Initially, I planned to select four schools that have won the most Green flags in Malta (Green Flag schools are those recognized for successfully implementing the seven-step methodology to raise awareness and address environmental and social issues in their schools and communities: Refer for a more detailed explanation to Section 2.5.1). However, when I spoke with one of the EkoSkola teachers (who is also a national coordinator for other ESD programs in Malta), she recommended four highly active EkoSkola committees that excel at promoting SD at both the local and national levels, despite having fewer Green flags than other schools.

Although I am sure that other Maltese secondary schools' EkoSkola committees are active and work hard to promote change in their schools and local communities, I wanted to work with a limited number of committees to create a dataset that was both large enough and manageable for an EdD thesis.

When the committees were identified, I also identified the other participants: HOSs, link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers (Refer to table 3). Before submitting the proposal and sending a formal application to the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the University of Sheffield, I browsed the respective school websites and Facebook pages to familiarize myself with the EkoSkola committees of these four schools and their main SD-related focus areas. Table 3 presents the necessary information for all research participants (their role, the schools from which they are coming or serving, and, if applicable, their age). The educators' age was not included in the table because, for this research, it was not considered an essential factor in data collection, whereas the students' age was important.

Name	Role	School	Age
Chris	Head of school	Filfla Secondary School	N/A
Carmen	Head of school	Kemmuna Middle School	N/A

Katie	Head of school	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Doris	Head of school	Gaudos Secondary School	N/A
John	Ekoskola teacher	Filfla Secondary School	N/A
Marisa	Ekoskola teacher	Kemmuna Middle School	N/A
Stephania	Ekoskola teacher	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Ann	Ekoskola teacher	Gaudos Secondary School	N/A
Rebecca	Link teacher	Filfla Secondary School	N/A
Elaine	Link teacher 1	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Fiona	Link teacher 2	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Josette	Link teacher 3	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Graziella	Link teacher 4	Melita Secondary School	N/A
Lynsey	Link teacher	Kemmuna Middle School	N/A
Roberta	Link teacher	Gaudos Secondary School	N/A
Federica	Committee (Student)	Gaudos Secondary School	12-16 years
Maria	Committee (Student)	Gaudos Secondary School	12-16 years
Brenda	Committee (Student)	Gaudos Secondary School	12-16 years
Francesca	Committee (Student)	Gaudos Secondary School	12-16 years
Briony	Committee (Student)	Gaudos Secondary School	12-16 years
Martina	Committee (Student)	Melita Secondary School	12-16 years
Ella	Committee (Student)	Melita Secondary School	12-16 years
Kim	Committee (Student)	Melita Secondary School	12-16 years
Lisa	Committee (Student)	Melita Secondary School	12-16 years
Noella	Committee (Student)	Melita Secondary School	12-16 years
Khloe	Committee (Student)	Kemmuna Middle School	12-13 years
Sophie	Committee (Student)	Kemmuna Middle School	12-13 years

Matthias	Committee (Student)	Kemmuna Middle School	12-13 years
Jake	Committee (Student)	Kemmuna Middle School	12-13 years
Gemma	Committee (Student)	Kemmuna Middle School	12-13 years
Liam	Committee (Student)	Filfla Secondary School	14-16 years
Zack	Committee (Student)	Filfla Secondary School	13-16 years
Thomas	Committee (Student)	Filfla Secondary School	13-16 years
Amber	Committee (Student)	Filfla Secondary School	13-16 years
Mona	Committee (Student)	Filfla Secondary School	13-16 years

Table. 3 Participants' information

3.4.3 Data collection

A formal application containing all the details, including objectives, a proposed methodology, and the entire data collection procedure, was submitted to the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the University of Sheffield. The application also addressed the various ethical considerations that this research needed to acknowledge.

When the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the University of Sheffield approved the application (see Appendix 4), I requested permission to conduct research in both State and church schools. Two separate application forms were submitted: one to the Ministry for Education, Youth and Research and Innovation (MYER) (Research department) and another to the Secretariat for Catholic Education (Malta). Both forms included the same consent forms and information letters (Appendix 2).

Most of the data had to be collected during the academic year. Since many institutions take longer to approve conducting research at their schools, when approval is granted at the end of the academic year, the researcher has to collect data the following scholastic year. Additionally, EkoSkola committees generally start their meetings in October or November, which delays organizing focus groups and meetings with the committees. I received initial approval from MYER (see Appendix 4) and, shortly thereafter, began contacting the two state schools. The second approval (see Appendix 4) from the Secretariat for Catholic Education was obtained in May 2022, after which I contacted the other two schools.

A letter was sent to the HOSs, describing the entire research study (see Appendix 2). I explained that the committees were selected for their active involvement in the EkoSkola program and for their experience implementing it at their school. I also informed the schools that this research aimed to examine how students participated and expressed themselves. Once the HOSs agreed to participate, they received consent forms for educators and parents. An appointment was then scheduled to conduct interviews with the HOSs, link teachers, and focus groups with the EkoSkola committees. The HOSs were interviewed at their offices, while

the link teachers and committee members were interviewed at the same location where the committee meetings took place. All the interviews with the EkoSkola teachers were conducted online via MS Teams, as it was the most convenient method for all participants.

Before beginning the interviews, I re-explained the research's purpose and goals. I emphasized the importance of their participation and clarified that it was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. All participants agreed to continue with their participation in this study.

Before starting each interview, I explained their roles in this research and the aims of the study, and I also asked for their permission to audio-record the interviews. I explained that the recordings would only be used by me or, if necessary, shared with my supervisors. All participants agreed to proceed, and the interviews commenced. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. Although the interview questions were prepared beforehand (Appendix 3), I sometimes needed to ask follow-up questions for clarification as the interviewees responded. This greatly helped me understand their arguments better and encouraged the interviewees to share more about the topic.

Although there was no fixed chronological order for conducting the interviews, I held the focus groups shortly after interviewing the link teachers. I found this approach helpful because the link teachers provided me with more insight into the committees before I met them and organized the focus groups.

When the respective schools informed me of their EkoSkola teachers, I emailed all four. The role of the EkoSkola teacher is to support the committee and make the necessary connections between the committee, Nature Trust Malta, and FEE. I invited the four EkoSkola teachers to take part in my research so they could share their perspectives and opinions on how the participant EkoSkola committees implement their projects and initiatives. After receiving their acceptance and signed consent forms, we scheduled an online interview appointment.

3.5 Data analysis

This research study adopted a qualitative, inductive methodology. Although the literature review guided the topics related to the emergent themes, no codes were prepared in advance. The inductive approach helped the researcher analyze data and develop codes and themes. This method also provided flexibility and valuable insight into the themes derived from the raw data.

Thematic analysis of data

This research used Thematic Analysis (TA) to analyse data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. TA is a widely used method in academic research for analysing qualitative data because it identifies, examines, and groups themes (Bernard and Ryan, 2009; Guest, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013). This analytical approach tends to organize large amounts of data into meaningful themes. By doing this, a researcher can better understand participants' experiences, views, and perceptions. Bernard and Ryan (2009) explain that

thematic analysis helps generate new insights or clarify existing theories. The six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) enhances understanding by revealing underlying patterns and interpretations. Additionally, differences in responses, complexities, and diversities in participants' views, as well as contextual influences on how interviewees reply, can be easily captured. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), TA is a transparent and repeatable method for analysing data from interviews, focus groups, and documents. In this regard, TA does not aim to test a hypothesis but rather to understand the meaning behind data collected from various participants who share their views on the same topic.

Although many data analysis software options are available on the market, I chose to analyze data manually without computer assistance. All the interviews were immediately transcribed and printed. When transcribing audio-recorded interviews and focus groups, I used an intelligent verbatim transcription style to eliminate non-essential disfluencies and minor grammatical errors from participants' speech. According to McMullin (2023), this transcription style also preserves the participants' voices and content while improving the text's readability. Additionally, Point and Baruch (2023) and Eftekhari (2024) explain that an intelligent verbatim transcription style makes coding and analysing research findings easier. To ensure accurate transcriptions, I re-listened to the recordings and checked for any missing text.

This decision to transcribe the recordings and print them was made because, while analysing the data, I wanted to better understand it and simultaneously make related notes to reflect on what was said. Although analysing data manually requires more time, I felt more confident working with the data in printed form and manually sorting it on the table. In this way, I found it easier to compare excerpts from different interview transcripts. For the thematic analysis, the six-stage model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted, as explained below.

Stage One: Familiarising oneself with the data

The transcripts were read multiple times, and several side notes were made. All ideas and thoughts were listed and noted on the margins. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this step is essential because it helps become familiar with the data and develop a deep understanding of ideas, thoughts, and impressions.

Stage Two: Generation of initial codes

This stage is crucial because data is divided into manageable pieces that can be easily analysed. The codes describe what each part of the data represents. While reading the transcripts, phrases or sentences considered relevant or potentially interesting were marked. Then, all marked phrases and sentences were cut out and assigned a code. Braun and Clarke (2013) defined coding as a process of identifying features related to the research questions. Once all the phrases and sentences were coded, the codes were grouped. Table 3 presents all the codes and their frequencies (the number of sentences and phrases assigned to each code).

Codes	Frequency
Educator support	20
Project implementation	9
Promotion	41
Personal Qualities	8
Student leadership	58
Empowerment	41
Student-HOS relationship	29
Inclusion	16
Community Outreach	20
Challenges and barriers	82
Whole school approach	10
Change	20
Awareness	8
Decisions	30
Research	7
Interests	19
Perspectives/Voice	8
Distributed leadership	18
Consultation	8
Perseverance	10
Representation	5
Peer Support	7
Achievements	5
Hands-on learning	10

Table 4: Codes and frequencies

While coding phrases and sentences, several memos were manually created. These memos captured my thoughts, relationships between codes, and any doubts that might have arisen during this process (refer to Appendix 5). Some phrases were assigned multiple codes because they conveyed different messages that could be interpreted differently.

Stage three: Generation of themes

By identifying patterns and similar ideas, codes are organized into sub-themes, creating a meaningful connection and structure in the data. Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasize that the proposed themes should relate to the research questions. When codes were created, several patterns emerged, which helped generate themes. Although some codes could belong to more than one theme, most were easier to classify under a specific theme. Some codes even became themes.

Stage Four: Reviewing themes

At this stage, the researcher must ensure that the themes are well-supported by data and are meaningful and coherent. This stage also improves the clarity and validity of the analysis. Therefore, themes with insufficient data were removed.

The data analysis identified four themes. I ensured that the codes within each theme were consistent and relevant to their respective themes. As a result, the four themes encompassed all the data.

Themes	Codes
Leadership	Student leadership Distributed leadership Student/HOS relationship Representation Empowerment Decisions Consultation Voice/perspectives
Personal Qualities and attributes of committee members	Perseverance Interests Achievements Qualities Change
Challenges, barriers, and support (or lack of) received by committees.	Challenges and barriers Educator support Peer support
Promotion and Outreach	Whole school approach Awareness Community Outreach Inclusion Promotion Project Research Hands-on learning

Table 5: Codes grouped into four main Themes

Table 5 lists all codes associated with the related themes. Some checks were performed during data analysis by randomly selecting a number of phrases or sentences and recoding them again. This was done to verify the accuracy of the coding process. However, since I was familiar with the transcripts, the recoding process did not take long, as very similar codes were assigned to the selected phrases and sentences.

Figures 4 to 7 show how the different excerpts (with their codes) were sorted into sub-themes and themes.

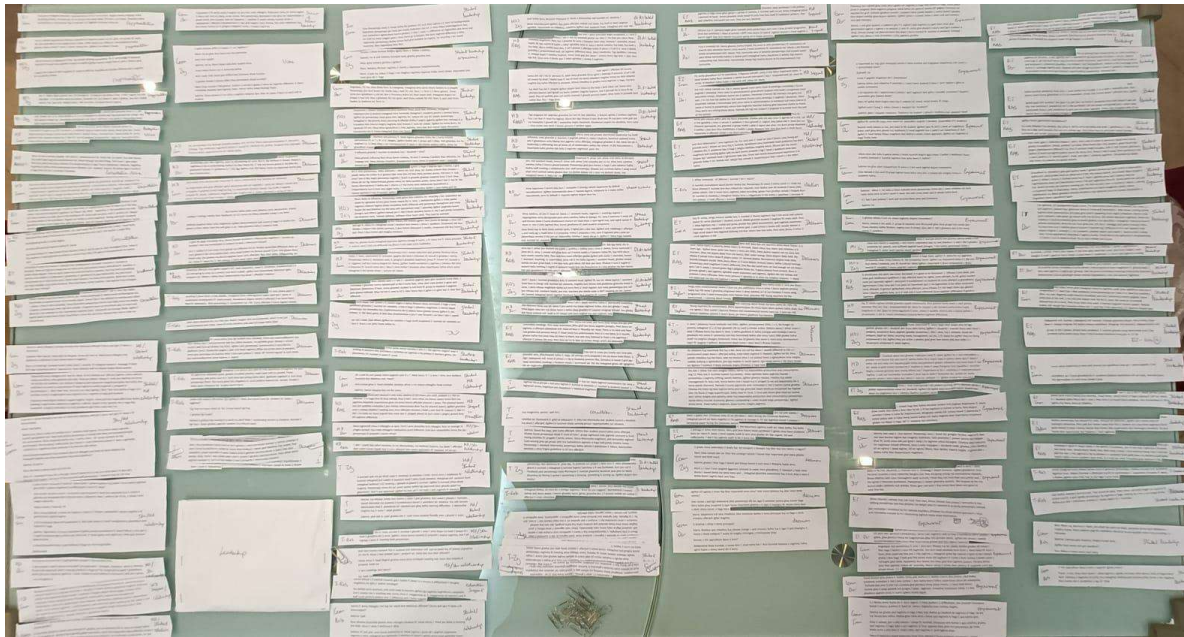


Fig.4 Leadership codings

Figure 4 (Leadership) shows how the excerpts were sorted under 5 sub-themes. This was the theme with the most excerpts, as most of the discussions focused on the leadership styles of the HOSs, who made the decisions; the type of dialogue they used with their HOSs; and students' empowerment and leadership.

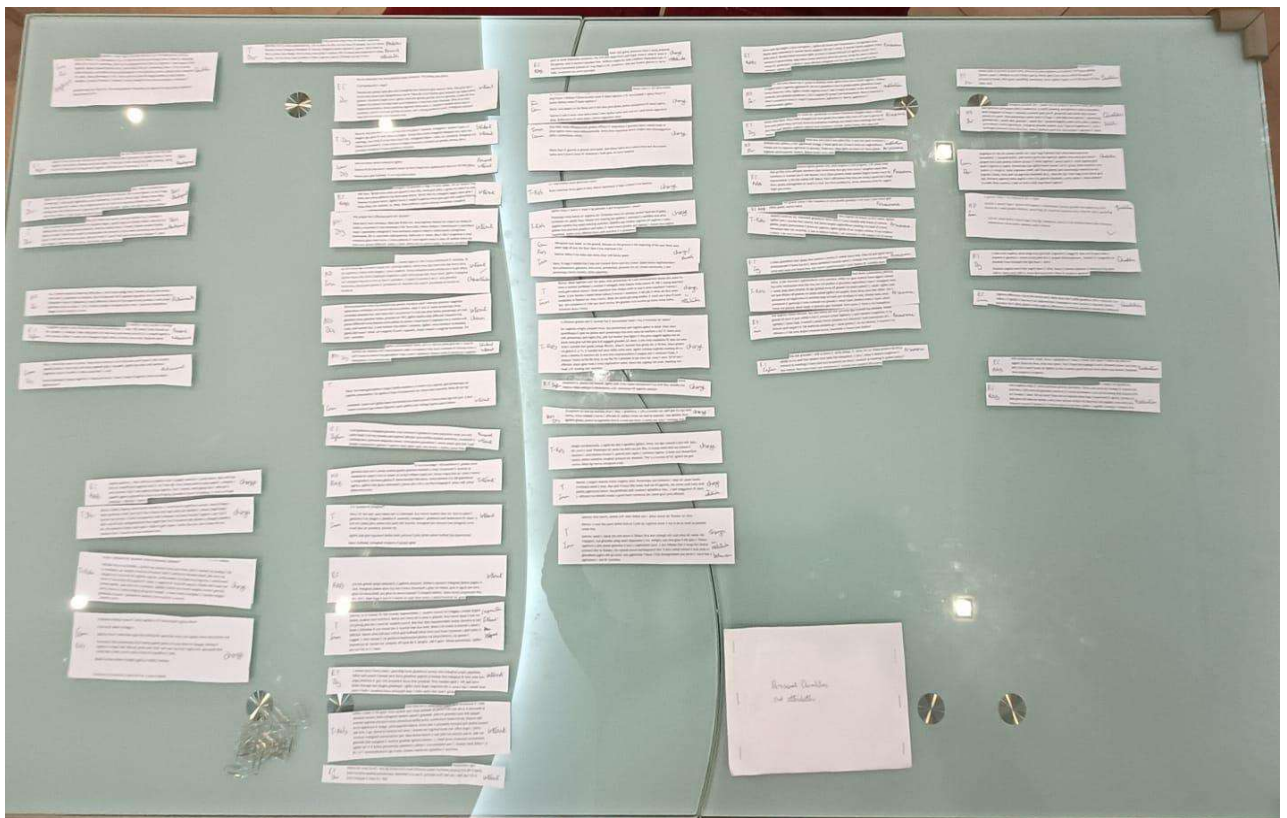


Fig. 5: Personal qualities and attributes of committee members codings

Figure 5 (Personal qualities and attributes of committee members) shows the different personal qualities and attributes mentioned during the interviews. Some qualities, such as perseverance, enthusiasm, motivation, and teamwork, were mentioned in all interviews and focus groups. The other qualities were mentioned by either the educators or the committee members themselves.

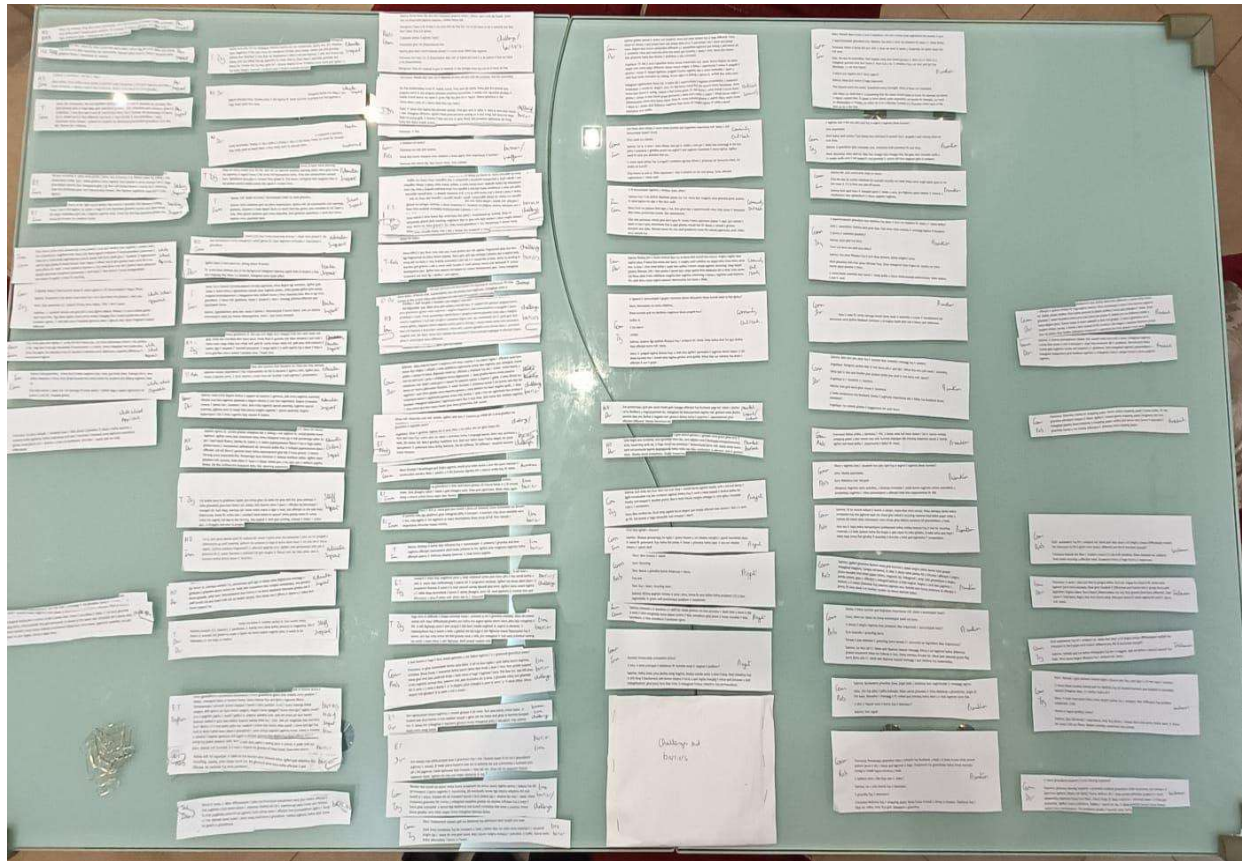


Fig. 6: Challenges and barriers codings

Figure 6 (Challenges and barriers) presents excerpts highlighting the challenges and barriers encountered by the committees during project implementation. During the interviews, the educators discussed various situations and issues encountered by the EkoSkola committees and how these barriers were overcome. During the focus groups, the students spoke about challenges related to a lack of support from educators and peers, limited meeting time, and difficulties they encountered while implementing their initiatives. All the challenges and barriers were classified under eight sub-themes/groups.

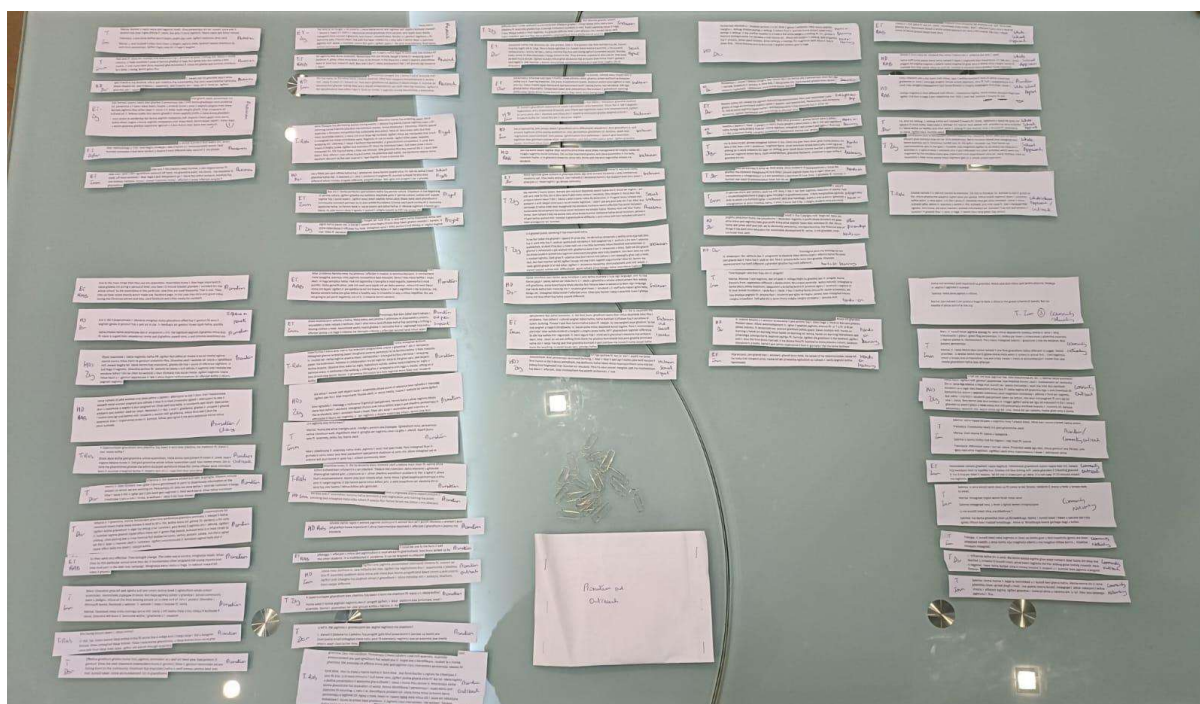


Fig. 7: Promotion and outreach codings

Figure 7 (Promotion and outreach) shows how the excerpts were categorized under six sub-themes. While giving an overview of their projects, the EkoSkola committee discussed the strategies they used to promote their work and reach students, parents, educators, and, in some cases, local communities.

Stage Five: Defining and naming of themes

According to Guest (2012), defining and naming themes adds analytical depth and interpretative richness. Furthermore, Guest (2012) states that well-defined, named themes enable clearer communication of findings to readers. The process of defining themes helped give each theme meaning and understand how it can aid in comprehending the data. Table 6 presents the definition of each theme.

Theme	Definition
Leadership	Describes the traits of school leaders and how they can effectively engage with committees through consultation. It also highlights children's leadership (empowered by educators and peers), who actively participate in decision-making with educators.
Personal Qualities and attributes of committee members	Describes the qualities and attributes of committee members and how such qualities and attributes help them to voice themselves and actively participate in decision-making.
Challenges, barriers, and support (or the	Shows the challenges and barriers committee members encounter while implementing their EkoSkola programs. It also illustrates

lack of) received by committees	how educators and peers support committees, and how committees, in turn, seek support from others.
Promotion and outreach	Explains the methods used to promote EkoSkola programs at schools and in local communities. Provides evidence of how students, parents, and local citizens actively participate in implementing the necessary changes to support sustainable development.

Table 6: Definition of themes

Stage Six: Writing a report to represent data

Braun and Clarke (2006) and Bernard and Ryan (2009) emphasize that findings should be presented as a story rather than a list of themes. This approach makes the findings evidence-based, consistent, organized, and engaging. Bernard and Ryan (2009) noted that at this stage, data must be interpreted rather than merely described. Chapter Four presents the results of data analysis, supported by relevant quotations, and discusses the raw data in relation to relevant national and international literature.

3.6 Ethical considerations

This research involved children and adults who were asked to share their experiences, perceptions, and views about the implementation of various initiatives at the four participating schools. Although this study did not address sensitive issues such as political affiliations, gender, cultural discrimination, or religious beliefs, all necessary precautions were planned before, during, and after data collection to protect all participants from potential harm.

Alderson and Morrow (2018) emphasized the importance of considering actions that might unintentionally harm participants, especially children, who are considered vulnerable and have the right to understand what their participation in research involves. Previously, Fraser et al. (2007) asserted that ethical research is guided by three principles.

- Principles of respect and justice: the researcher must respect and be sensitive to young participants sharing their thoughts and ideas. During the interviews, children sometimes did not answer the questions or spoke about topics other than those asked. In this regard, I rephrased the questions and spoke more simply to ensure understanding. This principle also highlights the importance of being fair to participants and listening carefully to their responses without judging or disagreeing with them.

- Rights-based research: children have the right to participate in research, to be well-informed about their involvement, and to express themselves. Meanwhile, adults should listen to them and treat them with respect.
- Best outcomes-based ethics: any research should aim to bring benefits to children and find solutions to issues that negatively affect their health, education, and psychological well-being.

When the research proposal was approved by the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the University of Sheffield, I contacted the schools and spoke with the HOSs. I explained the aims of the research and the roles of participants in data collection. Once the HOSs approved and agreed to participate, I sent a copy of the recruitment letter and consent forms, which were then given to the committee members and all involved educators. The recruitment letter and consent forms for parents and children were written in both Maltese and English to ensure everyone understood the information. The recruitment letter outlined all the steps to be followed during and after data collection to protect the confidentiality of all children. The consent form included all statements on which consent was based, and both documents listed my email address and my supervisors' contact details for any questions prospective participants might have before participating. Participants were also informed that they could opt out or withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason, without consequences, and their withdrawal would not affect their final results or assessments. It was emphasized that non-participation was also acceptable. Participants were told that all recordings would be destroyed after the thesis was reviewed and assessed. They were also informed that during the research, all recorded data and notes would be stored on the University's Google Drive to ensure confidentiality and protect identities, in line with GDPR (2018). The consent forms and recruitment letters for committee members were given to the respective HOSs, who distributed them and collected the signed documents. After gathering all signed documents, I scheduled appointments with the committee's link teachers. Consent forms and recruitment letters were also sent to the HOSs, link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers. When I received the signed forms by email or collected them from the participant schools, I scheduled meetings with the participants.

After completing all interviews and focus groups, I transcribed and translated all recordings into English. The transcripts were also stored in the University's Google Drive, with backups on an encrypted external hard drive. To protect participants' identities, I assigned fictitious names, which were used in chapter 3 (3.4.2) and chapter 4 when presenting portions of the transcripts. Participants were informed about these fictitious names, but they did not know which names were assigned to them. Regarding the National Coordinator of one of the Maltese ESD programs, who suggested the four committees as my research participants, even though no actual names were mentioned, I requested additional consent. The person was asked to accept that, despite confidentiality measures, there remains a possibility of identification. No objections were raised, and consent was given.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter offered a detailed overview of the research design, the tools used, and the data analysis. The research aimed to gather the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of all stakeholders successfully implementing the EkoSkola program in their schools. All interviews were transcribed, and the data were coded and categorized. Although such data cannot be considered representative of the entire population, it provides the reader with insight into how EkoSkola programs operate in these four eco-schools.

In this chapter, I also discussed all the ethical considerations taken during data collection and explored important philosophical issues related to research limitations. One of the main advantages of conducting research with children is ensuring that their voices are heard. However, several factors related to power imbalance and knowledge construction pose potential threats to data reliability and the creation of unwanted biases.

Chapter 4

Research findings, analysis, and discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the data gathered through a qualitative research approach across three Maltese secondary schools and one middle school. The findings were also critically analyzed and discussed, utilizing various local and international literature.

4.2 Participant schools' background

When the four prospective participant schools agreed to take part in this research project, I requested the EkoSkola committee's action plans from the link teachers. I also browsed the schools' websites and Facebook pages to gather more information on the initiatives undertaken by the four EkoSkola committees. The information collected from these sources helped me better understand how the committee members raised awareness of environmental and social issues and mobilized their schools' and local committees to act in favour of sustainable development (SD).

Kemmuna Middle School is located in the North-West region of Malta. The school has about 364 students. It is a co-educational middle state school, serving the North-West areas of Malta. Since starting the EkoSkola program, the school has earned two green flags.

The Ekoskola committee's action plans focused on waste management. Separation of waste and the excessive use of paper and unnecessary materials were major concerns for the committee. They decided to reach the entire school by setting up a notice board that provides all the information on how to separate waste properly, reuse and recycle materials, and organizing special assemblies to encourage more students to work with the committee, raise awareness, and take necessary action for change.

In 2023, the EkoSkola committee conducted research on waste generation during the Christmas period. They studied how much wrapping paper families used during Christmas celebrations. Before the holidays, they made a school announcement urging all students to collect the wrapping paper used for Christmas gifts. In January, all the collected wrapping paper was gathered and stored in a room. They weighed the papers and sorted them by material type. The room was then arranged as an exhibition, and the committee invited all the classes to view a display of the wrapping paper and their research findings. The committee members set a timetable, and each committee member had a designated time to present their findings and suggest ways to reduce unnecessary waste. After all students visited the exhibition and gave feedback and suggestions, an article was published for the Young Reporters for the Environment, which received a national award from FEE. Additionally, the committee used the school notice board to promote waste management and reduction, and they continuously encouraged the principles of the three Rs (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle).

Filfla Secondary School is situated in the Southeastern part of Malta. It has a student population of around 950. It is a Co-Educational Secondary State school, and its catchment area is located in the southeast of Malta. Since starting the EkoSkola program, the school has been awarded three green flags. The school implemented several initiatives to reduce plastic waste.

After conducting an environmental audit, they discovered that the school was generating large amounts of plastic and paper waste from the tuckshop. They consulted with the head of school (HOS) and introduced a loyalty scheme for students and staff members who used their reusable plastic containers when purchasing food from the tuckshop. The committee worked with the tuckshop owners to reduce the use of plastic and paper bags, plastic packaging, disposable straws, and cutlery. Those students and staff members who received several loyalty points received vouchers that could be exchanged at the school tuckshop.

In addition to this initiative, the committee also promoted waste separation within the school premises. They produced informative videos explaining how to reduce, reuse, or recycle unwanted waste. These videos were used during the celebration and Community Action Day for the LitterLess campaign. During the Community Action Day, some NGOs were invited to the school to inform students, staff, and parents about how to reuse and reduce waste.

Gaudos Secondary School is located in the southern part of Malta. It has a student population of approximately 473. This school is a girls' church school managed by nuns. Since joining the EkoSkola program, the school has earned five green flags. The school focused on three main initiatives: waste separation, food waste reduction, and schoolyard embellishment.

The school environmental audit revealed that many olives and fruits were not harvested and went to waste over time. Next to the school, there is a large garden that is part of the convent. Before this project began, the nuns did not collect the olives and fruits that grew each year in their garden. The olives were taken to a local agricultural cooperative, where they were pressed into olive oil. The fruits were sold to the school community, and the proceeds supported the vegetable patch. On this patch, vegetables were grown using organic pesticides and traditional farming methods. This initiative encouraged more students to participate in farming both during science lessons and breaks.

Another important initiative was the embellishment of the schoolyard. Old dustbins were replaced with modern bins that separate waste, and potted plants were added. The committee members organized several school assemblies and used the school MS Teams to promote their work. Although the committee met regularly, members had different roles and responsibilities. They led various sub-groups focused on sharing information, gathering data, and conducting hands-on activities. An interesting fact about this committee is that they did not have fixed leadership roles. They did not have a president, secretary, or vice president; however, all members agreed to work on areas that interested them and that they enjoyed.

Melita Secondary School is located in the Port region of Malta. It has a student body of 480. It is a girls' church school managed by nuns. Since launching the EkoSkola project, the school has received five green flags. The EkoSkola committee focused on two main themes: permaculture and waste reduction.

The permaculture project involved all students, aiming to grow herbs and vegetables for Home Economics classes and to sell them during school events. The committee communicated with the entire school via MS Teams and strived to engage everyone in supporting the school's permaculture. Additionally, the committee promoted planting trees in the local community and used social media to express their concern and opposition to the cutting of trees in urban areas.

The thrift shop project was another initiative where students started collecting used materials and planned to sell them in the shop which is next to the school. With this initiative, they wanted to promote waste reduction and collect money for charity or to purchase goods for permaculture. Last year, the committee involved an ex-student, who is also a local influencer, in promoting the Thrift Shop. The local influencer helped the committee raise awareness about the importance of reusing materials rather than discarding them and replacing them with new goods.

4.3 Overview of the main themes

The inductive analysis of findings from interviews and focus groups with HOSs, link teachers, EkoSkola teachers, and committee members identified four main themes, each with multiple specific sub-themes. Table 7 presents these four themes along with their respective sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Leadership	Distributed leadership Decision making Dialogue Empowerment Student leadership
Personal Qualities and Attributes of Committee Members	Working in a team Self-motivation and perseverance Learning from changes and achievements
Challenges, barriers, and support (or lack of) received by committees	Lack of time available for committee members to meet Lack of time for HOSs to listen to and meet the committees Lack of financial support for the committees Turnover of link teachers Lack of staff (both teaching and non-teaching) support The fear of change Lack of formal recognition from the education system Students spend only two years in middle school.
Promotion and Outreach	Choosing and identifying projects and initiatives Doing research Promotion of projects and work

	Promoting Sustainable Development Practices to the parents and local communities Promotion of Hands-on activities and intrapreneurship as part of EkoSkola Projects. Promoting social inclusion
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Table 7: The four themes with their respective sub-themes.

4.3 Theme 1: Leadership

This theme centres on the influence of both the HOSs and students' leadership in effectively managing and implementing EkoSkola programs. Although my research findings indicate that the HOS's support and leadership style are crucial to successful program implementation, students' leadership of their peers is also essential. In my presentation of results, I will also refer to Mitra's (2008) three-tiered model of student voice and participation to assess the level to which the committees have reached while implementing their ESD programs.

4.3.1 Distributed leadership

The four HOSs highlighted the importance of EkoSkola in their school communities and explained that, to support the committee better and given its significance to the school, they had delegated the EkoSkola project to one of their assistant heads or a head of department (HOD). All the HOSs who participated in this research confirmed that they preferred a distributed leadership approach for the project. Doris emphasized the importance of adopting this leadership style at her school. She mentioned that her leadership should be shared, so that more people would be involved.

We at this school work a lot with distributed leadership. I believe that as a head of school, one cannot do anything alone. For me, when in my absence the school is running well, and everything works well without major hitches, then that is how I can measure that my work is done well.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Similarly, Chris explained how he prefers to share his leadership with anyone willing to help improve the school environment or his leadership style.

As the head of school, I am not a rigid person; I do not impose and won't listen. Therefore, I delegate things, and even when someone comes up with a proposal, I listen, see whether it makes sense, and if children will benefit or the school will benefit from it, we go for it. I adopt the same ways with the EkoSkola [committee].

(Chris, Head Filfla)

Although Chris and Doris said that their EkoSkola committees are very important and their initiatives are very useful at their schools, the fact that an assistant head of school was assigned to support the committees could be viewed differently. If the projects were truly

considered very important, a HOS would seek to personally support the committee, as the projects would be a high priority, especially if the committee's initiatives could address most of the school's environmental and social issues. Even when adopting distributed leadership styles, according to Bush (2011), highly important (top-priority) tasks usually fall directly under the HOSs' responsibility. Ultimately, Carmen admitted this by stating:

I can admit that this year, maybe because I know that the HOD works a lot on EkoSkola, so I had put my mind at rest, I didn't give enough time to EkoSkola. However, there were so many things: examinations and sorting of papers, supervision, I needed time to guide my deputies, because, like me, they were all new here. So I had to focus on giving them support so that they would not feel at a loss because there was no one to guide them. I aimed to see that all the work is done. So, yes, in this case, I could not find time to speak to the committee and listen to them. But now I can.

(Carmen, Head Kemmuna)

This shows that at Kemmuna Middle School, because the HOS could not find time to meet with the committee, the students could not collaborate in decision-making, so authority mostly stayed with adults (Level 1 of Mitra's three-tiered model). Harris (2003), Bush (2011), and Fava Galea (2015) explained that it is challenging for HOSs to adopt this distributed leadership style because it also involves sharing power, and trust levels among the leadership team, teachers, and students must be high.

It is very important that there is a person, especially the head of school, who understands and knows what is happening. She gives us importance and trusts us, not just letting everything go. Our head of school takes care of these things, and she likes to give us opportunities as a committee.

(Kim, Committee Melita)

Fullan (2003) identified three types of Trust: Competence Trust, Contractual Trust, and Communications Trust. The data collected from the four participant schools show that the HOSs trusted the committees because they believed the committees were competent enough to resolve issues, understood the good intentions of the committee members, found the committees reliable in honouring commitments, and saw them as consistently dependable.

Katie affirmed that when her school was chosen to contribute to discussions on the new Education strategy, she immediately thought of involving both the EkoSkola committee and the student council to represent her school. Knowing the importance of these discussions and how much they could improve the school's image, Katie believes these two committees can serve her school well.

Yes, for example, we will soon receive an invitation from the minister to participate in the discussion on the education strategy. I have already spoken to them [EkoSkola committee] and the school council to work together and represent our school. You will be amazed at how this committee has developed strong public

speakers who can effectively discuss a range of issues. I know that they are good at this.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Doris admired how children on the EkoSkola committee express their thoughts and ideas and persuade others to follow them. While highlighting their skills and assertiveness, she reflected on how careful she had to be to avoid creating barriers for them, as their work was invaluable to her.

When you observe certain children who commit themselves, they work hard, and they give you more courage. And you will say to yourself, I should not make any barriers, but instead I should try to help them to continue. When you observe them, you will say, these will surely become assertive adults, leaders, because they have so many skills!

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

This shows that when Doris shared her leadership with the students, the level of collaboration in decision-making increased, indicating that the committee could reach beyond level 2 of Mitra's (2008) three-tiered model, even though Doris herself admitted that the HOS always made the final decision.

Chris, who was impressed by the EkoSkola committee's work, said that he trusted them as much as the link teacher leading them and his assistant head, who supported them.

I am very happy with them. I know that the children who are part of the committee are very good students. Obviously, they need to be motivated to do this, as they are, and I know that they are very trustworthy. I trust them as much as I trust the link teachers who are leading them and the assistant head who is supporting them.

(Chris, Head Filfa)

On the other hand, the committees said they trusted their HOSs because they knew they had the ability and motivation to support them. They mentioned that when they asked for their HOSs' support, their commitments were always honoured, and when communicating with their HOSs, they felt listened to and that their HOSs genuinely tried to help them.

But we always have her support and trust. Always, but sometimes it becomes very difficult to organise a meeting with her to discuss and organise an activity. But obviously, we need to go through her. However, we always manage in some form or another, even though it takes more time.

(Federica, Committee Gaudos)

Amber explained that the committee trusted their HOS because, according to her, the HOS always showed interest in what they were doing, and she listened to them attentively.

You must have a person like the head of school who understands what is happening [their initiatives] and gives them due importance, and not just whatever... Our head really takes care of these things, and she really enjoys listening to us.

(Amber, Committee Filfla)

In this regard, Harris (2003) emphasized that effective distributed leadership depends on strong interpersonal relationships among all stakeholders. Consequently, HOSs feel less threatened by educators and students who assume leadership roles, and likewise, students do not feel silenced by their HOSs.

Although leadership and management of the EkoSkola program are delegated to an assistant head or a head of department, all the HOSs recognized the importance of receiving feedback and updates from the link teacher, the assistant head, or the head of department in charge of EkoSkola on how the committees were functioning. For example:

So when you have distributed leadership on different levels, you have teachers who are taking the lead, they keep you updated, but at the same time, they have the freedom to do certain things, and then you have children. So, leadership is infiltrated into all levels of all stakeholders within the school. Naturally, it is very important to remember that whatever we are doing, we are doing it for the children.

(Katie, Head Melita)

In this case, as with the other three participants' HOSs, Katie claimed she did not abdicate from the role; however, despite delegating the task, she still wanted to provide support.

EkoSkola has a long tradition at our school, and it has passed through different phases. However, for the past seven years, it has prospered a lot, especially when my predecessor introduced Laudato Si. This is the Pope's encyclical paper, which focuses on the environment and society. Even now, since I have the subject at heart and I am working with a religious congregation, I am working a lot on caring for the environment and global combat for education.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Having an interest in the subject is essential for maintaining these programs, as Ackley and Begley (2010) demonstrated. ESD programs like EkoSkola are successful only when HOSs value the subject and understand its benefits. Harris (2003) also suggests that when HOSs share their goals and purposes with educators and students, and when these goals align with stakeholders' aspirations, there is a higher chance of achieving them. In this case, Katie attested that when her school connected its religious values and the Papal Encyclical to sustainable development, students not only gained more support from educators but also better understood the importance of giving their best to successfully implement the EkoSkola initiatives.

4.3.2 Decision-making

The ESD: Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) and Jones and Welch (2010) emphasized that children have the right to make decisions with adults about issues that affect their present and future. This also aligns with the Maltese National Children's Policy (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2017). In one of Mitra's (2008) projects with children (which led to Mitra's three-tiered model of students' voice), it was shown that at a particular participant school, children were asked to choose and provide feedback on textbooks and other educational materials. However, later, the same children realized that educators had already made their choices before the consultation periods began. This lack of children's participation in decision-making was also mentioned by Mansfield (2018), Strand (2019), and Mayes et al. (2019). Although this approach was not observed in the four participating schools, the two church school committees appear to be more consulted during the decision-making process than the two state school committees. The two church schools' EkoSkola committees were consulted not only on environmental issues (or waste management) but also on school embellishment and the better use of unused areas. However, Chris and Carmen (HOSs of Filfla Secondary School and Kemmuna Middle School, respectively) stated that although their EkoSkola committees were always involved when environmental issues arose, for other matters such as teaching and learning, homework policies, and behaviour policies, the respective committees were not consulted, and the SLT made the decisions. This shows that, in such a scenario, the EkoSkola committees were at level 1 of Mitra's (2008) model, as students' involvement was limited to expressing views on decisions that seemed already framed by the SLTs.

When the HOSs of Gaudos and Melita were asked whether their committees were consulted directly when decisions had to be made, they replied in the affirmative.

Yes, consultation is done even on small things, for example, when we are organizing the Christmas party and there is a supplier that is insisting on, although it is a frivolous example, on supplying muffins wrapped in plastic. We discuss with them how to avoid plastic and find ways how we can replace plastic to reduce it as much as possible.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Doris elaborated on the value of children's opinions in decision-making.

In reality, when you go to different people you will get different opinions. When you go to children, they have certain opinions, certain ideas are not always possible to do. This is because at times such ideas are either frivolous or else they are not seeing things from a wider perspective, such as safety, safeguarding, etc. However, at the same time, children also have very good ideas.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Although Doris says some of the children's ideas might jeopardize their safety and well-being, it is unclear which ideas were considered frivolous and which were deemed good. The

possibility is that, as Black and Mayes (2020) emphasize in their study, when ideas align with adult expectations, they are often considered good, whereas ideas that challenge the status quo might be perceived as frivolous.

Doris also explained that one of the most significant issues the SLT faces is that, at times, decisions need to be made quickly, leaving insufficient time to listen to students' ideas. She affirmed that:

There are many situations when we need to make decisions. We would like to take a lot of feedback, but if we need to decide quickly, you cannot afford to go round. So, unfortunately, something that hinders participation is time rather than the will, because we have the will to work with the children.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Although decision-making is attributed to responsibility and power, it is not clear why certain decisions are subject to time limits, while others allow more time for discussion. In the two participating state schools, the culture is that the HOS is the decision-maker, and other stakeholders assist and provide feedback when their input is needed. Despite time being a limiting factor, consulting the committee on an important decision may yield greater subject-matter knowledge, leading to more informed decisions. The impression that the HOSs are giving is that when 'small' decisions need to be made, children can be involved and take their time to conduct research and engage in critical thinking. Nonetheless, when larger decisions need to be made, the SLTs decide, and if there is sufficient time, the link teachers and committees are consulted. This confirms that the two participating state schools, despite their efforts to contribute to decision-making and school change, remained at level 1 of Mitra's (2008) model of student voice and participation, moving to level 2 only when 'small' decisions needed to be made.

All four EkoSkola teachers interviewed in this study stated that the themes their committees focused on were selected after the committees themselves conducted a school sustainability audit to identify relevant environmental and social issues at their school. These themes were then linked to one or two SDGs. Stephania explained that:

Children ideally conduct a school audit, and they come up with a theme. However, there are cases when they mention that there is a big problem, such as problems with the management of waste in school, and it is useless to take another theme that emerged in the audit, because that is more urgent. We are facing this. In that case, they do an audit only on that theme.

(Stephania, EkoSkola Teacher Melita)

When asked why 'ideally' they conduct a school audit, Stephania admitted that some schools (not referring to the participant schools) she supports do not perform audits but focus immediately on school environmental issues that the committees believe need to be addressed. Nevertheless, according to Stephania, all four participating schools have completed their environmental audits.

Similarly, Marisa explained that the committee realized that their school also faced a waste management problem. So, they decided to increase awareness during the Christmas period.

They [the EkoSkola committee] focused on waste management and chose Christmas and how to manage waste during the Christmas festivities. Then they decided on how to proceed and found ways to manage it. In their case, they decided to focus on how to reduce the amount of wrapping paper during the Christmas period.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

Stephania explained that sometimes, adults need to encourage and generate certain ideas. According to her, it is not always easy to let them come up with ideas and issues without providing support.

However, Marisa had a different opinion about this:

Yes, when you talk about EkoSkola, when you have children of a certain age, in most cases, the educators do take a step back because their children are of a certain age, they know how to articulate certain themes, comments, and certain arguments.

She continues:

They set the agenda and decide on which topics they would like to discuss. For example, in the case of [Kemmuna Middle School], their theme was concerning waste. So they discuss waste management, break down the theme into small pieces, and find out ways how to solve the issue...

Marisa then spoke about the past decisions taken by previous committees that left a lasting impact:

I had several committees that asked for solar panels on the school rooftops... There were times when they told them no because they were too expensive. But with time, such panels were installed...I don't know whether such action plans are in place, but if they are included in the school development plan, then things will change.

(Marisa EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

The contrasting experiences of Stephania and Marisa show that, despite both committees having students of similar ages, one committee is still in a phase that needs guidance on which areas to work on, while the other is capable of making independent decisions without adult intervention. This can be interpreted in different ways. One might say that in one school, the committee is less influenced by adults, while in the other, the committee either follows its educators' decisions or refrains from making its own because it believes its educators know more. On the other hand, the SLT at Melita seems to believe that children are not knowledgeable or experienced enough to make independent decisions. Therefore, in this

context, it appears that the SLT of Melita exerts a stronger influence on the committee in choosing and deciding on themes and projects. Although the EkoSkola committee at Melita Secondary School collaborates with educators to address issues, in certain instances, it has not assumed leadership in identifying the main issues. Thus, one can still consider them at Level 2 of Mitra's (Mitra, 2008) theory of students' voice and participation.

4.3.3 Dialogue

The four participant HOSs admitted that they do not organise frequent meetings with the committees; however, they all said that their doors are always open whenever students need their support.

So, in general, we don't meet that much. Maybe during a scholastic year, we meet an average of four times. When we meet, we discuss different points. Sometimes we discuss sustainability, or they come up with some proposals or other issues.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

When the committees were asked whether they felt the need to meet their HOSs regularly, the response was contrasting:

Liam: Yes, I think we see that need. We have a lot of different opinions. So I think we will perform better if we have his input.

Amber: Since he takes care of our school and he decides, he gives approvals, we can discuss with him and find different ways how we can work together.

(Committee Filfla)

According to Liam and Amber, if their HOS spends more time listening to them, they can make better decisions on how to address various issues. However, Kyra and Sabrina, who are on the Gaudos committee, said that there is no need to meet the HOS regularly as long as the link teacher updates their HOS on what they are doing.

Maria: For us, it is impossible to meet during the break because during the break, the Head might have meetings. So the teacher speaks to us.

Brenda: At the beginning of the year, we spoke to her and shared our ideas, and she saw what we were trying to do. The teachers speak to her about our ideas. But they speak to her a lot.

(Committee Gaudos)

For the Gaudos committee, there was no need to meet their HOS regularly, even because of time limitations. If they have time to meet, it is better to discuss how to work together and lead their peers, and then their link teacher updates the HOS. From Maria and Brenda's statements, which are also supported by their HOS, it is evident that the EkoSkola committee of Gaudos Secondary School has not only learnt how to collaborate with their educators and HOS, but they were also aware when they needed the support of their HOS and when they could work independently to find solutions and lead their peers in initiatives. These findings,

along with those presented later in this chapter, suggest that this committee has reached level 2 and is gradually progressing toward level 3 of Mitra's model of student voice (in terms of working on issues related to SD).

Doris emphasized the role of the school leadership team (SLT) in supporting the school and enabling educators and children to generate ideas for improvement. Although the final decisions are made by the head of school (HOS) in collaboration with the SLT, Doris mentioned that the SLT encourages everyone to share their ideas.

We meet and project certain decisions; however, we work a lot with dialogue. We believe that when you involve those who are directly involved in something, you will reach the goals. You are giving them a voice and you are giving space to those people who can give you more.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

This statement needs to be analyzed because it can, at times, convey conflicting messages. Although Doris previously claimed that she seeks everyone's input when making decisions, it appears that dialogue is used to gather feedback on decisions already made by the SLT. Therefore, the perception is that dialogue aims to understand how educators and students feel about the decisions and how these decisions might affect them, rather than being used to make decisions collaboratively.

However, in another instance, Doris says that if there is a new initiative that promotes changes, the SLT tries to listen and work with those who propose it and support the initiative:

We try, as much as possible, by default, to accept new proposed initiatives. So automatically our reply, we think about it and consider everything, however, our reply is always yes.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Damiani (2016) explains that understanding that children can become partners in leadership enables HOSs to recognize more opportunities to understand the different issues experienced at their schools. This is in line with Mitra's (2008) model at levels 2 and 3. Nevertheless, at Gaudos, the SLT's default acceptance of children's proposals does not necessarily benefit the children. This is because, according to Fielding (2001), children need to learn to dialogue and negotiate to ensure their proposals are accepted rather than rejected. Children need to learn that acceptance is contingent upon many factors, including feasibility, economic considerations, and manageable time frames (Simmons et al., 2005; DeFur and Korinek, 2010). So, by default, accepting all suggestions and initiatives might restrict children's ability to reflect and to find better solutions when proposals are rejected. In addition, being partners in decision-making does not mean that one side proposes and the other accepts everything by default.

Marisa confirmed that from her personal experience, when the HOSs meet the committees, they are interested in listening and the involvement is not tokenistic.

They [committees] might come up with some proposals that you might not have thought about. And it happens. It depends on the head of school and the type of leadership one believes in. Some heads attend committee meetings, and you see them taking notes when students share ideas. Then they say I like this suggestion; I will do it.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

Marisa affirms that the committees feel more motivated and encouraged when their HOSs listen to them and implement their proposals. Similarly, according to Chris, the consultation process is very important in school, and children have a pivotal role.

For consultation, if there are things related to the school, at the school level, I am saying, then yes, we discuss, we discuss with the assistant head and also with the students.

(Chris, Head Filfla)

Chris' statement is acknowledged by Hopfenbeck (2013), who reiterates that for educators to genuinely listen to their students' voices can be a real challenge. Hopfenbeck (2013) emphasised that educators need to learn to listen to students' perspectives, even though at times they might not be keen to know them. Stern, Powell, and Ardoin (2010) explained that children's experiences and perspectives offer ideal opportunities for school communities to foster personal growth by strengthening teamwork, encouraging collaboration, and promoting leadership among all stakeholders.

Katie and Doris explained that when there are environmental issues at school related to waste management and greenery, they feel comfortable consulting children, especially the EkoSkola committee members, to address these issues:

So, when it comes to the environment, we automatically say we have the EkoSkola committee that is made up of children and educators, and we look at them not distinguishing between those who are students and those who are teachers, but one team... As much as possible, the ideas need to come from children to ensure their ownership.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Throughout the years, we have always felt the importance of giving voice to students and EkoSkola. [I] have always seen EkoSkola as an ideal space for that. They insist to me that although they form part of the committee, the whole school needs to act, because the EkoSkola committee represents the whole community, so the truth is that actually, the whole school community is a member of EkoSkola.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Similarly, the HOSs of Melita Secondary School and Filfla Secondary School emphasized the importance of listening to the committee's proposals and supporting them as much as

possible. They believe that when students see that the HOS supports the initiatives, students show more interest.

When they came to me to inform me that there were students who were ignoring them, in one of the assemblies, I emphasized that the green wardens are there to help and that we need to take care of them. So, they need to listen to them. However, I cannot say that all the students were listening to them.

(Carmen, Head Kemmuna)

The Melita Secondary School EkoSkola committee expressed their happiness that their HOS was listening to them, as they felt that what they were doing was good and useful not only for the school but also for the nation.

Ella: Yes, because we are doing something good. We joined EkoSkola to do something, and we are not forced to do anything. We are here because we want to, and so we are doing something that we enjoy.

Kim: And I think, and I think this is common to the whole committee, we feel very comfortable talking about something right to do. We are making our world better, even for example, when tourists come to Malta, and even for the Maltese, we are making our place better.

Lisa: At the same time, we are creating awareness about certain things that are problematic, for example, climate change.

(Committee Melita)

From Ella, Kim, and Lisa's discourse, it is understood that at Melita Secondary School, the EkoSkola committee learned to work with their HOS and educators to identify problems and promote change.

Similarly, committee members from Melita and Kemmuna emphasized that receiving support from their respective HOSs indicates that their efforts are not only approved by the HOS but also well-regarded. This support helps them find alternative solutions to issues that could impact their futures. For the committees, this suggests that gaining the HOS's support reduces barriers and increases recognition from educators and peers. However as discussed earlier it depends a lot on the type of decisions that need to be made. If the decisions are 'small' the SLTs listen and allow collaboration and involvement (level 2 of Mitra's model) but if important decisions need to be made students are either heard (when there is time) or else not consulted at all.

From the data analysis, it emerged that when committees meet and discuss projects with their HOSs, the HOSs utilize four common ways to support them. These were:

- i) Supporting the committee during a school assembly.
- ii) Giving them space during school events such as prize/celebration days to promote the project.

- iii) Supporting them when issues were encountered with parents or other students who did not back their initiatives.
- iv) Providing the necessary resources needed.

During the interviews, it was also evident that although the HOSs said they were happy to consult the committees when needed, John and Stephania indicated that this was not always the case. When asked why HOSs tend to consult the link teachers first rather than going directly to the committees, both justified this practice due to lack of time and also acknowledged the importance of hierarchy.

Sometimes at school, there are so many things that we tend to forget the EkoSkola committee. When you decide to meet and make certain decisions, you might not even include them in the equation. Not always but many times... However, that leaves another question. Are they doing enough promotion? Why are they not consulted?

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

Posed with the same question, Stephania's reply was:

Yes, everyone has one's pride. Yes, this is becoming quite common. Do not forget that the head had full confidence in the link teacher. Imagine I am a link teacher, the head of school has a problem, and she goes to the students without even consulting me. For sure, I will not be happy.

(Stephania, EkoSkola Teacher Melita)

These two statements require considerable reflection. Despite HOSs stating that they encourage strong children's involvement in decision-making, they still do not want to remove the hierarchical powers that dominate school systems. Some HOSs prefer to maintain stability by first consulting link teachers and then going to the committees. This behaviour prevents issues with link teachers who might feel unimportant and less respected, or treated at a lower level than the children. Hoerr (2015) views this as an issue of school culture. If the school culture does not promote a bottom-up approach, where those who are at the bottom feel proactive to act and participate, while those who are on top feel comfortable to listen and consult those who are at the bottom, educators continue to feel that power structures need to remain strong and continue to struggle to maintain the status quo.

In this regard, the four EkoSkola teachers affirmed the importance of effective communication and strong relationships between the HOS and the EkoSkola committee.

The school leadership has a lot of impact. Even for example, the school calendar of events, there are annual events linked to EkoSkola, and I see this as an acceptance.

(Ann EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

This school has an SLT that works a lot in favour of EkoSkola. They introduced interesting concepts such as the empowerment of women. The head speaks a lot about it, and it is part of the school's ethos.

(Stephania, EkoSkola Teacher Melita)

Stephania indicated that Melita Secondary School is one of those schools where there is a clearly visible, very high level of cooperation between adults and children. This shows that when projects align with the school policies and ethos, educators allow more space for collaboration and dialogue, making it easier for the committees to reach Level 2 of Mitra's (2008) model.

For Ann at Gaudos Secondary School, being a member of EkoSkola is prestigious, and, according to her, students feel very confident in sharing their ideas and speaking with their HOSs.

Being part of the EkoSkola is prestigious, and they receive a lot of support from the head and other educators. That is why there is a very strong team. I believe that having 90 students who are members doesn't come by chance. Even thanks to the link teachers, they feel important that they are part of the committee.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

Bezzina and Bufalino (2014) emphasized that effective leaders must demonstrate their commitment to their values to gain the confidence of educators and students. They added that good leaders can change an organization, but great leaders can change people, thereby fostering consciousness and collective action.

4.3.4 Empowerment

The four HOSs who participated in this research indicate that EkoSkola projects empowered children to develop problem-solving skills, encouraged their active participation, and boosted their confidence and leadership. According to the HOSs, this empowerment was enhanced when students knew that all the SLTs supported them and when students firmly believed in the importance of creating a more sustainable lifestyle. According to Chris, when committee members felt empowered, they led other children to change their habits. Also, they passed the message on to the parents to help create a more sustainable environment.

The committee is important because it helps them become more active; that is, the students who are on the committee are more active in favour of the natural environment, obviously, they make other students aware of issues, about the natural environment, climate change, recycling, waste management, etc. And at the same time, they are getting empowered. So, they are active and work with a common aim to improve the environmental situation at our school.

(Chris, Head Filfla)

Chris echoes Damiani's (2016) assertion that when HOSs give more importance to students' responsibilities and voice, students are empowered, resulting in better behaviour, more involvement in educational programs, and students and staff sharing more sets of goals, which helps students better develop their collaborative skills.

Katie discussed the school's ethos, which emphasizes student empowerment. As a girls' church school, it aims to empower the students and to challenge unequal power dynamics in broader society.

Yes, at our school, this is an interesting aspect, maybe because they are girls, and I believe in it. On the empowerment of women in this society, and I work a lot on this with the children. I try to encourage them to move forward, to never look back, and not get disheartened, and they will surely succeed. And you do not believe how much difference such a push makes.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Katie's statements echo hooks' (2000) argument that schools need to create opportunities for girls to understand social inequalities, discrimination, and oppression while engaging in meaningful dialogues to bring about the social changes that empower and encourage women's participation in decision-making. This is also strongly emphasized in UNESCO's (2014) UN DESD. Environmental and social issues cannot be solved without giving girls and women the opportunity to participate and voice their opinions at all levels, including school, local, national, and international levels. It is difficult to focus on solutions to environmental issues if, at the same time, some people are disadvantaged or silenced because of their gender, sexual orientation, or belonging to other minority groups. At Filfla Secondary School, the committee representative (Liam), who has an individual educational need, has empowered many of the students who work with him on the committee. Chris mentioned that the student was so empowered that he overcame all the barriers and was pivotal in public speaking and promoting the project:

Within the committee, there is a student with individual needs, and whenever there was an assembly or celebration day, he wanted to speak. And even the fact that he has a speech problem doesn't stop everyone from listening to him. All the children admire him, and in the end, they all give him a round of applause.

(Chris, Head Filfla)

Despite the challenge, Liam (Committee member) was very enthusiastic about speaking and encouraging others to endorse the project.

At one point, he was unable to speak; he began stammering. The same word was said more than 10 times, and you could notice that the hall was silent, and when he finished, there was a standing ovation... I also appreciate how he inspired the other members of the committee.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

Liam's leadership helped the committee focus on the set objectives and achieve better publicity within the school community.

Furthermore, the four EkoSkola participant teachers claimed that on many occasions they felt the EkoSkola program empowered children and helped them become confident in both implementing projects with a whole-school approach and involving people outside the school.

Some of these occasions included the Gaudos Secondary School committee travelling to Amsterdam to discuss their project with other partner schools in the Netherlands, and being invited to participate in local EkoSkola summits.

Last year, some of our students went abroad. They took the message even to foreign schools. Although in their case, with local councils and local networks, they remained a bit behind, they are going strong with international networks. I had the chance to listen to their debates during one of the summits. They were really good. I surely cannot say that they are not confident!

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

When asked why they were not successful with local networking, she replied:

I think because of time limitations. I think they prefer to focus on the whole-school approach, and, due to a lack of time, they give less importance to local networking.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

Ann reflected on the importance of giving committees more opportunities to participate in local forums and summits. Such opportunities help students become more confident in expressing themselves in front of larger audiences.

I think there should be more awareness on a national level, both in schools and among parents. Look, if we utilize half a day discussing new policies, parents should not object that they [students] lose a school day. So we need to show the importance of involving children in these exercises.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

According to Roberta, over the years, EkoSkola has provided students with various opportunities to act and make decisions on different issues. Their leadership and empowerment paved the way for important environmental and organizational changes within the school. Thakran (2015) affirms that the effectiveness of ESD programs should be measured by the degree of change in people's attitudes and behaviours towards a more sustainable lifestyle. At schools, changes need to be seen at all levels, from formal, non-formal, to informal education. Roberta states that despite all the challenges, the Gaudos Secondary School committee managed to persuade their teachers to revisit their pedagogies to make them more student-friendly and enjoyable.

For example, last year we had students from Year 8 who brought forward the idea of outdoor learning for all the subjects. They do not need screens; they get out and discuss outside in the green area. They went to the head to propose it and told her that they needed it. They did some research and found out that it is not only an enjoyable experience, but they can also reduce the consumption of electricity.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Rebecca recounted the episode in which EkoSkola was criticized for introducing a token system in their school tuck shop to reduce waste. Although she was upset with the criticism, she was astonished by how the students responded to the parents.

A parent wrote that our system was promoting buying from the tuck shop..... So we received negative comments, and I was really upset because this did not even cross my mind... They discussed it, and one of the students sent a very diplomatic reply. The reply said that the committee understood her point, but EkoSkola was working hard on the project and that they were committed to a cleaner environment....

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

Additionally, this experience demonstrated how empowered students were despite the challenges in reaching the set goals. It also shows that, according to Mitra (2008), by taking the initiative to reply to the concerned parent, the students gained structural empowerment (reaching level 3 of Mitra's model). Saylan and Blumstein (2011) emphasized that empowering committee members results from developing critical thinking, teaching individual responsibility, and promoting social engagement through dialogue.

Roberta also discussed how committee members felt it was important to encourage each other and their peers to maintain the project's momentum.

As a link teacher, to tell you the truth I don't know all the names of the students. That is, I cannot place a name on all the faces I have. But they manage to work in synchrony with everyone without any difficulties, without fighting. It is amazing, I think this needs to be part and parcel of our education system.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Roberta explained that EkoSkola helped children understand that they can have a say and stop unsustainable habits:

I remember I had two students during a lesson, who wanted to make a petition on plastic bottles... they did research on how to do a petition, and these two students went around the school to collect signatures and took them to the head of school, and since then, water bottles were no longer sold from the tuck shop.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

On another occasion, the teachers at Melita Secondary School explained that the children had also inspired the nuns to create a dyslexia-friendly area at the school.

Once, the sister [nun] came to us. They wanted to whitewash the classes, so she consulted one of the students who was the president of EkoSkola. I don't know whether she was consulted because she was the president or because she had learning difficulties. She consulted her on the colours of the paints.

(Graziella, Link teacher Melita)

When the committees were asked what gave them the confidence to speak up and successfully execute their projects, they mentioned several common factors. These included:

- i) They have shown interest in EkoSkola from a very young age, and when they were young, they learned from older students.
- ii) They support each other and manage to communicate well with each other.
- iii) They have a lot of support from their link teachers and SLT.
- iv) They enjoy observing positive results that promote SD at their school.
- v) Their love for problem-solving issues.

4.3.5 Student leadership

From the HOSs' discourse, it is evident that throughout the project, the older students typically assume or are given leadership roles and attempt to lead the younger students. Doris asserted:

I think that the fact that the students are reaching other students and the fact that we have a large number of older students is not like when you have younger students trying to convince older ones. But we have students of all ages trying to reach other students within the school. The way the older students look at the younger ones, and the way the younger ones look at the older ones, is different.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

This shows that at Gaudos Secondary school, older students on the committee led their peers and sometimes even their educators during project implementation, demonstrating that on these occasions, they have reached level 3 of Mitra's (2008) model of student voice and participation. Katie explained how committee members led the entire project and convinced their peers to actively participate in making the necessary changes.

We had the marathon walk, and last week we took them for a walk in the vicinity of Buskett and Siggiewi, wherever they went, they took the bags to clean the area. They involved other students who were not in the committee, but the idea that we all form part of EkoSkola is widely practiced at our school, and so it became part of our school culture.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Similarly, Chris explained that in his opinion, the committee is quite influential at his school.

Even when you listen to children talking to each other, especially during assemblies, the whole school remains quiet, listening to the committee members. I think that the fact that the children themselves are the speakers and are taking the initiative to promote the project with their peers, I think it leaves an impact. They lead by example.

(Chris Head Filfla)

These three statements suggest that EkoSkola projects provide students on the committees with opportunities to take on leadership roles and learn how to guide others toward common goals. This is very important as such initiatives help the students reach level 3 (student leadership and capacity building) of Mitra's (2008) model.

In all four participating schools, students joined EkoSkola through an open call, and in three of the four schools, students elected a committee comprising a president, vice-president, and secretary. This committee leads the other students and makes the necessary decisions. Additionally, according to the Gaudos Secondary School committee, credibility increases when everyone observes progress and the committee is perceived as a diligent team.

Maria: I think that when we said that we would do something to solve an issue, they can see progress. We do progress. When we had the issue of the general waste, we reached our goal. Everyone learned from this experience, and we reduced a lot of plastic. Our noticeboard is always full because we work a lot. So, they see results. They can see us working.

Briony: Even students and educators know that the work we are doing is for a better future for us and the next generation. Even things that are happening around us, like climate change, do not concern only those who are on the committee. Everyone needs to understand and work for it.

(Committee Gaudos)

Surprisingly, the Gaudos Secondary School committee decided not to elect leadership roles. According to Ann, despite being an uncommon practice, the decision not to elect leadership roles was made by the committee members themselves.

They focus on each other's strong points. It was their decision. They told me we do not want to have a president because all of us have a specific role, and if there is an activity outside school, we decide who will attend.... If you always send the president and the vice president, you will always give the same opportunity to the same people.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

For the committee, leadership roles were not seen as important because they believed all members were equally valuable and wanted to guarantee everyone had the chance to express themselves at the school, local, and national levels. Despite not having a hierarchy within the Gaudos Secondary School committee, members worked collaboratively and supported one another to ensure they had a strong influence across the entire school when promoting SD.

In this regard, Ann observed how the committee members worked hard to ensure that the crops the students were growing during the lessons were properly watered, harvested, and eventually sold. They also made sure that other students participated in hands-on activities and enjoyed the entire experience.

For example, some had the duty to harvest the crops and collect them in bunches, and tie them. They decided to ask other students to get reusable bags to use when they sell the crops to teachers and staff members.... Although they were not in a committee meeting, they still had a lot of interactions among themselves and with the link teacher.

(Ann EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

In all four focus groups, the students' leadership skills were clearly evident. They explained how they collaborate, decide on task sharing, and adopt different methods to encourage fellow students to support them and successfully carry out the program. Although there were times when they felt not all students listened to them or contributed, or when proposals could not be implemented, they still demonstrated a great deal of determination and perseverance, which was contagious.

During the break a lot of children order food from the tuck shop and the paper bags are left on the grass or the pavement. We continue to encourage them and when we see them, we ask them why? What is the point? Does it make a difference if you walk four paces and throw them in the bins? We try to make easy access to organic, recycling, and mixed waste bins to make it easier for them.

(Martina, Committee Melita)

In fact, we are in Year 11, we are the leaders of the projects. I am the leader of the bottle caps and had some Year 7 and Year 8 students helping me. I tell them what we need to do. Sometimes we have students from other year groups with us, but I think that some of the Year 7s can be good leaders for their peers.

(Brenda, Committee Gaudos)

Some members of the Filfla Secondary School committee spoke about the importance of always being determined to find solutions and working together to implement new things.

Amber: Yes, if we work enough, we can get the needed changes because we have all the means.

Me: When you say we work for it, what do you mean?

Mona: We work together, we do research, and then we implement what we need.

Liam: And if we find that we cannot do something, then we find other means. Finding an alternative to reach where we want to go.

(Committee Filfla)

Here, Amber and Mona show that, by collaborating with adults (level 2 of Mitra's model), students became partners rather than consultants, thereby contributing to more discussions and initiatives. Similarly, Damiani (2016) found that when the HOSs sought support from educators and students to address issues within their schools, the approaches taken were more authentic and transformational. This created schools that were more responsive to their

children's needs. In addition, Damiani (2016) explained that when HOSs use their adult perspectives to guide their leadership practices, children may set goals that differ from theirs, thereby thwarting their social and academic development.

When the HOSs were asked whether the committee represented all students, they all agreed that, since the committee included students of different ages, it did. However, in another instance, the HOS of Filfla Secondary School explained that, despite a large number of non-Maltese students attending his school, they are not represented on the committee. Although it is unclear why this happened, the fact that non-Maltese students are not represented on the committee means the committee is missing their perspectives and ideas. This could be very influential if, in the future, the committee is asked to address social issues experienced at school, since, as Robinson (2014) stated, the more diverse the group is, the wider the range of perspectives and the greater the likelihood of finding solutions to complex issues.

Similarly, Chris also noted that students from lower academic bands tend to show little interest in EkoSkola. It is worth noting that in state middle and secondary schools, students are classified into three bands: high, medium, and low. This classification is based on the results achieved in the annual examinations.

In my school, there are around 216 foreign students. However, within the committee, we do not have any foreigners. I cannot give you the reason why. Also, we have a lot of students coming from top classes forming part of the committee. Most of the students come mostly from the top bands, or middle bands, but from lower bands, we do not have any response....

(Chris, Head Filfla)

This lack of representation of non-Maltese students on the EkoSkola committees was observed across all four participating committees. Although Chris tried to justify it by pointing to the lack of interest these students generally show toward school activities, this does not justify such a complete absence from participation. Freire (1970/2017) argued that when minority groups are underrepresented, those who represent them (the majority group) often fail to understand their realities, experiences, and perceptions. As a result, the representation becomes oppressive and discriminatory. Despite the open call for committee members, students from minority groups may not feel encouraged to participate. Referring to Gauci (2011), her study also demonstrated the lack of participation in EkoSkola committees among minority groups and students with lower academic ability. For the former, she argued that the main barriers were clustering (students felt more comfortable with peers from similar cultural backgrounds), the language of instruction, and communication. For the latter, students with lower academic achievements viewed school as an obligation and showed little interest in anything beyond the minimum requirement. Gauci's (2011) results could explain why this same issue has appeared across the four participating schools (especially at Filfla Secondary School). It is unfortunate that with more encouragement and better communication, students with lower academic abilities and those from minority groups might feel more comfortable joining the committees and enriching them with diverse experiences and perspectives. In the participating schools, there appears to be no mechanism to encourage students from diverse

cultural backgrounds or those who do not perform well in exams to join EkoSkola, even though it is expected that they will automatically show interest and actively participate like all other students in the majority group. This supports what Robinson (2014) stated earlier: the absence of mechanisms to promote diversity in children's committees leads to narrowed perspectives and a limited understanding of issues, greatly reducing the chances of finding solutions to complex problems. These findings also reveal that, in the participating schools, Maltese students who performed well academically found it easier to progress from Mitra's (2008) level 1 to level 3, whereas non-Maltese students and students with lower academic performance were given fewer opportunities to advance.

4.3.6 Summary of findings

According to the participants:

- i) The distributed leadership style adopted by HOSs helps committees function more effectively and encourages student leadership.
- ii) The decisions about which themes and action plans committees focus on are made after students conduct a school environmental audit.
- iii) The more the HOSs invest time in listening to committees and supporting their initiatives, the more confident and empowered the students become.
- iv) EkoSkola committees are usually consulted on environmental issues, but they are less frequently asked about social and academic matters.
- v) Generally, the decision-making process is carried out by the SLTs, and students are consulted at various levels depending on time constraints and the nature of the decisions that need to be made.

4.4 Theme 2 Personal qualities and attributes of committee members

After analysing the findings, various qualities, attributes, skills, and characteristics were identified and categorized. These were then organized into three sub-themes. From the interviews and focus groups, it was highlighted that many students already possessed these qualities, attributes, skills, and characteristics before joining the committees; however, some were also gained or developed after becoming members.

Sub-themes	Identified qualities, attributes, skills, and characteristics
Working in a team	Listen to each other having leadership skills Work in Collaboration Effective Time Management Share a common goal (love for the natural environment)

Self-motivation and perseverance	Motivation Persistence Perseverance Enthusiasm Competitive Problem solvers Public speakers
Learning from changes and achievements	Evaluate and reflect Creative thinkers Use technology effectively to find solutions and ideas

Table 8: The main qualities, attributes, skills, and characteristics possessed by the committee members and identified during the interviews and focus groups.

4.4.1 Working in a team

While analysing the interviews and focus groups, it has been observed that, despite the diversity within and among the four committees (with members having different thoughts and personalities), committee members share several similar personal qualities. These include being good listeners, demonstrating leadership skills, collaborating effectively, managing time well, and sharing a common goal and a love of the natural environment.

Erss et al. (2024) indicate that there is empirical evidence that acquiring non-academic traits—such as creativity, perseverance, and organization—through extracurricular activities and teamwork—leads to positive outcomes not only in education but also in achieving better socio-economic status. Similarly, the OECD (2019) affirms that combining cognitive and non-cognitive skills makes students' agency one of the most important life skills, applicable not only in school but also in workplaces and personal lives. Student agency has an active cultural component, influenced by the individual's capacity, and is also a social phenomenon, highly dependent on social relationships (OECD, 2019).

A prevalent factor among all the participant committees is that their members share a common interest in learning more about the natural environment, finding better ways to protect it, and understanding how to create a more sustainable lifestyle.

We have ninety students in EkoSkola; some are good academically, good at dancing, good at painting, and some are very shy to talk, but then you will find them growing and taking care of plants, etc. Some are good at selling goods, some are good at making posters. Some are good at setting up notice boards, others are good at public speaking. Every girl finds her niche here.

(Roberta, Link Teacher Gaudos)

Similarly, Doris noted that through EkoSkola, children can also recognize their talents and discover new aspects of themselves.

Take for example one can be good at something, and the other girl can be good at advertising, you also have that aspect, you have the aspect where a girl is gaining

certain skills and discovering hidden talents and skills. Then, you have the students' voice.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

According to Doris, allowing students to master skills and enjoy doing things they like is important in helping them not only gain determination but also voice themselves with confidence. Federica likes EkoSkola because it gives her and her peers opportunities to master what they like to do most:

One thing I like about EkoSkola is that everyone has the right to share their opinions and can choose whatever they want. For example, you are not forced to do marketing. If that does not interest you, you will surely not do a good job.

(Federica, Committee Gaudos)

This shows that at Gaudos Secondary School, when the committee worked as a team, it built capacity for leadership and change, aligning with level 3 of Mitra's (2008) model. The popularity of EkoSkola seemed higher at Melita Secondary School and Gaudos Secondary School than at Filfla Secondary School and Kemmuna Middle School. The fact that more students were involved in EkoSkola by forming several sub-committees also evidenced very high interest. There may be various reasons for this; the main one is that children join committees or subcommittees because they are interested in the topics being discussed and appreciate the initiatives being taken. However, as discussed in Theme 1, the fact that the committees involve the whole school when organising activities, and that the HOSs, SLTs, and educators have a positive overall opinion of EkoSkola, further boosts children's willingness to join.

When the EkoSkola committee of Filfla was asked which process was used to form their committee, Thomas affirmed that an election was not needed, as those who were interested were welcome to join:

Thomas: There were no elections

Mona: At the beginning of the year [scholastic year], the assistant head issued a form, like an application, to allow those who were interested to join. It was an open call for everyone. Whoever wanted to join, joined.

(Committee, Filfla)

This decision helped recruit those genuinely interested in the EkoSkola projects and avoided elections that, as Quinn and Owen (2016) suggest, might have rejected students who were most motivated to work on sustainability projects but were less popular among their peers, thus reducing their chances of being elected.

The students of Filfla Secondary School also spoke about their love for EkoSkola, and all those who expressed interest in joining the group were able to join.:

Liam: We didn't have an election.

Mona: In the beginning, there was an application, and whoever wanted to join, joined. It was an open call.

(Committee Filfla)

Marisa added that students join EkoSkola because they are interested in improving and protecting the natural environment. Those who are not interested in sustainability when they join would quit soon after.

Imagine you have something that is at heart. You will work more. Sometimes, they join EkoSkola out of curiosity; however, their hearts are not there. After some time, they will leave because there is no more interest. If you get elected, you can still leave; it is not something fixed; you can leave. You will still have good working committees...

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

The fact that the four participating committees were not elected avoided the possibility that the most popular (and not necessarily the most interested in participating) children would serve on them. Therefore, again, the issues discussed by Quinn and Owen (2016) regarding the election of students who prioritize fame over hard work to promote sustainability were not observed in these four committees. In fact, during the focus groups, all members of the four committees affirmed that their committees worked hard to achieve the set goals and that sustainable development was at the core of their work. These findings resonate with Vassallo's (2021) results, which showed that working effectively as a team and showing interest and enthusiasm for EkoSkola were common characteristics among her participants' EkoSkola committee members.

The reality at Kemmuna Middle School has also changed in the past year. In 2022, the Committee of Kemmuna Middle School was formed through an election; however, in 2023, they decided to change things, as only five students showed interest.

Gemma: Last year, students voted for us.

Sophie: We were around thirty who wanted to join, but only five were chosen.

Khloe: This year, we changed it, and instead of voting, we placed the application paper under the HOD's door, and whoever wanted to join wrote their name and joined.

Gemma: It seems that this year there are a lot of clubs at our school, and few children have shown interest. Only five have joined.

(Committee Kemmuna)

This increase in students' lack of commitment and interest during breaks was not an issue exclusive to Kemmuna Middle School; Chris also highlighted it.

Unfortunately, it is not only with EkoSkola because I noticed it, we speak about non-formal and informal activities during the break, for example, there are a lot of

children who do not join a club during the break. We have a lot of clubs, art club, chess, Italian, film club, we have a lot of different clubs that are open on different days throughout the week, but still they do not find it relevant to join one of these clubs. Not only EkoSkola, but they also say that it is our break, so we stay in the yard and enjoy it. We stay relaxed there. That is the mentality.

(Chris, Head Filfla)

On the other hand, Fiona explains that when the students are committed to doing something, they take the initiative to prepare well and make sacrifices:

Fiona: When we have something where there is a deadline, so there is some urgency, for example, to do a presentation. They want to address the school in an assembly, and so they prepare well for it. They see how they will present it, and there were instances where they met every day. Some come early in the morning to meet us to make sure that they achieve what they want.

(Fiona, Link Teacher Melita)

For Noella, working as a team was a blessing for the committee because they worked well together and focused more on their projects even when they encountered many hurdles.

Noella: We always did what we planned because of the teamwork. Our EkoSkola group is fortunate because it is a nice group; we work together and give others opportunities to work with us. We can move forward because we have this teamwork.

Lisa: Yes, because we support each other, and we were always successful with our teamwork.

Noella: I think that teamwork in our group is a strong factor, and I think that we can move very far thanks to this.

(Committee, Melita)

By recognizing the strength they gained from working as a team, the committee understood their importance at their school and found ways to encourage and support one another when needed. This strong team dynamic also improved collaboration with educators and, while implementing the EkoSkola projects within the school, helped students progress from level 1 to level 2 of Mitra's (2008) model. Additionally, the UN DESD (UNESCO, 2014) emphasizes that, to focus on SD issues, children need the right motivation and commitment to become change agents. Such motivation and commitment increased when the committee members observed positive changes in educators' and peers' behaviours and attitudes, and when educators encouraged and praised them for their initiatives.

Roberta also spoke about skill and personal development through the program's implementation.

The idea that everyone is good at everything is a gimmick. You need to find your niche, find something that makes you happy, something you like, and develop it.

When you leave school, you will find people who try to extinguish your fire, big fire extinguishers that want to stop you in every aspect.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Thus, Roberta is demonstrating that resilience needs to be nurtured from the beginning if committee members want to achieve what they have aspired to before joining the committee.

According to Ann, throughout the project, children also learned to identify areas where they needed more support and to ask for help when necessary. Fielding (2004) and Mitra (2008) revealed that this is a skill that children find quite hard to develop, especially if they are not given the right opportunities to speak up.

For example, yesterday, during the EkoSkola Summit, one of the students told me that we are not learning how to deal with stress. Unfortunately, we are trying to get by with these things. However, to acquire 21st-century skills, we need to provide public speaking, ownership, and voice. That is why EkoSkola needs to be featured in the school timetable.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

John explained that skill development should not only come from personal experience, but also that the education directorate or NGOs should create programs that offer children opportunities to learn different life skills.

However, the students have their limitations when it comes to experience.... They do not have the experience we have as adults because we might have had experiences working on different platforms or committees in the past. So when it comes to skills, such as trying to persuade, being assertive, and speaking in public, these skills need to be learned. We need to try and support these students to acquire these skills and provide them with assistance, such as organizing boot camps or creating situations where they can learn to be more convincing, build an argument, and not be afraid to talk in public. To get fresh ideas and learn to convince others to get on board.

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

John's affirmation aligns with that of Chapman and Sharma (2001), who emphasized that teaching children environmental concepts alone does not enable them to resolve environmental and social issues. However, if we teach children the techniques adults use to persuade each other (as John affirms), they will no longer view issues or solve problems in the same way other children do. As Mitra (2008) argued, children should learn how to critically evaluate situations and then identify possible strategies to address them. In this case, children need opportunities to participate in projects and extracurricular activities, and leading them (level 3 of Mitra's model) to gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to work both individually and collaboratively to find effective solutions and prevent future problems.

4.4.2 Self-motivation and perseverance

Self-motivation and perseverance were two qualities frequently discussed in most interviews and focus groups.

When you see certain children and how much they are determined, where EkoSkola becomes part of them, and you see them working hard, it gives you a lot of courage. You will say you cannot make barriers, but we must help them. You will say when they grow older, these students will become assertive adults, leaders, and a lot of skills will emerge...

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

This is important because, according to Marisa, children can relate what they are learning to their everyday life situations. Similarly, Doris recognized how much motivation and perseverance children need to coordinate and work on large projects in a very short time:

When I look at the EkoSkola group, I say to myself that they do miracles. Because of all the work they do, they do it in a short period every Friday because they have a longer break.... But they are so motivated, we have teachers and LSEs who motivate them and, in one way or another, they push them, giving them freedom, giving them opportunities to succeed.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

According to John, the biggest challenge for EkoSkola was during the COVID pandemic, when children's perseverance and self-motivation kept the projects alive despite the restrictions and numerous barriers. These included restrictions or prohibitions on mixing between bubbles (stable groups) during breaks and/or extracurricular activities.

During times when there was the COVID pandemic, they could not physically meet all together. Every form they met separately. However, they still found ways how they could use MS Team meetings to meet virtually. So, they found ways and means to continue with the project despite all the hurdles... If they had more space to work, there would have been more changes. Despite the numerous challenges they found the ways and means where they even found opportunities to speak to the public.

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

Briony affirms that perseverance makes students more competitive and more motivated to achieve. De Haan (2010) demonstrated that when schools focus on situated learning, children learn more effectively through direct experiences by working with others to solve problems and find appropriate solutions. While this improves interest in the subject, it also makes children more perseverant and motivated to learn. Briony emphasized that working as a team and participating in competitions helps make you more perseverant.

In fact, that is one of the best things that we have in our school is that we are very competitive. All the students, if you see us during the sports day, you will be astonished. So, if we have a project and we are working as a group, and at the end we do a PowerPoint, the credit is given to all those who do the task. For example, imagine there are five in a group and three of them worked a lot, and the others didn't. They still get the credit.... That is something that I don't like because I work a lot, and those who do not work still get a credit.

(Briony, Committee Gaudos)

According to John, another important factor that has sustained interest in EkoSkola was participation in YRE.

The first year after earning the green flag, they have two years to reapply for another green flag. There is the praxis that in the first year, they go slow, and then in the second year, when they have to meet the jury, they work harder and are more prepared. However, participation in the YRE is a leverage to continue working hard. When I met them this year, the first year after receiving the green flag, their enthusiasm was the same as when they were ready for the jury visit.

(John, EkoSkola teacher Filfla)

This is quite similar to what Briony said about competition. Since the YRE is a national competition, Briony felt that when her committee had the chance to compete with other schools, they became very competitive, motivated, and perseverant. However, despite YRE creating opportunities for committees to be more innovative and compete, time limitations meant committees invested their time in creating videos and awareness campaigns on a particular issue, leaving them with less time to address specific social and environmental issues that emerge during the year.

4.4.3 Learning from changes and achievements

Marisa emphasized the importance of learning how to evaluate one's work. She added that this is crucial when committees start to feel disheartened, helpless, or believe they are making no progress.

I tell schools that when they want to change, use parameters. Say I want to reduce electricity consumption by 10% or you want to reduce waste by 10%, so you have an achievable amount, and you will see success. How can you see this? The data will help you with this. Keep the data because with the data, you will have a clear picture of how you are performing, from where you have started and where you are now.

(Marisa, EkoSkola teacher Kemmuna)

Wink (2005) agrees with Marisa, stating that when individuals solve issues and understand they are contributing to change, they feel empowered and are more motivated to take the necessary actions to improve their situation.

When you measure success, the tendency is to look at it positively, and this gives you more energy to work. Even with a simple photo. What do we tell them? Take photos so that you can see the before and after state of the object. Because we forget, you forget with time. Our life is so hectic that even students forget... So, you have to keep a good picture of where you have started. That is why slow progress is progress.

(Marisa, EkoSkola teacher Kemmuna)

Transformation and change are one of the seven key characteristics of ESD programs, and understanding how much changes students' initiatives and efforts have brought would not only encourage students to continue working to find solutions to unsustainable behaviours and practices, but also encourage adults to support them. This has been emphasised both by the ESD: A Roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) and the DESD (UN, 2014).

Elaine and Josette discussed the importance of seeing and experiencing change. They believe that when change is experienced, committees feel motivated and determined to keep going.

Elaine: One of the biggest changes was about the use of plastic bottles.

Josette: And over the years, we changed our culture so that in every event, it has to be as waste-free as possible.

Elaine: Before, at our school, I didn't know how many water bottles were sold from our tuck shop. That has stopped. We now have two water dispensers, and no more water is sold because students bring their reusable water bottles. If they forget their bottle, we have reusable cups available. The second is that the tuckshop is no longer giving food in plastic bags. They use biodegradable tissues or their lunch, and food is placed in their lunch boxes.

(Link Teachers, Melita)

During the focus groups, the committees of Kemmuna Middle School, Melita Secondary School, and Filfla Secondary School expressed concern about the large amount of waste generated by the schools. However, the most worrying aspect was that this waste was not properly separated, and initially, no one seemed to care about the environment. Khloe and Gemma spoke about the large amounts of plastic bottles thrown away every day, the number of plastic and paper bags on the floor or the grass, the large number of plastic disposable cups used by the school staff, as well as the lack of general interest in creating more green areas within the school.

Khloe: There are some who do it purposely, throwing their waste in the recycling bag.

Gemma: Some students prefer sports more, and they don't really care about the environment. So, they focus on sports rather than recycling.

Sophie: Those who are interested pay attention and understand, and they also come and ask. But those who are not interested do it purposely and do not even consider you.

Gemma: I have a lot of kids in my class that do that, but I try to tell them to do it correctly, but they don't listen; they just ignore me.

Me: But why do you think they do it?

Gemma: Because they don't care!

Sophie: Because they think like adults do, that recycling is difficult to do.

Gemma: I see that year 7s are more interested than year 8s because I think year 8s are the oldest and they are not interested.

Sophie: But they are supposed to give an example to the younger ones, but not all of them do that.

(Committee, Kemmuna)

The challenging situation faced by the EkoSkola committee of Kemmuna Middle School made the members more persevering, courageous, determined, and creative in finding solutions. These experiences showed that children used their creative thinking to develop solutions and persuade their peers to adopt new attitudes. According to Mitra (2008), this is an essential prerequisite that helps students progress from level 1 to level 3. Thamarasseri and Jacob (2023) found a positive correlation between creative thinking and personality traits. It has been demonstrated that when children are allowed to use their personality traits and creative thinking alongside collaborative models, they tend to perform better academically. This also supports Tonuk and Kayihan's (2013) assertion that EkoSkola should be part of the curriculum to help children develop into responsible citizens.

When Lynsey was asked whether the students' attitudes had changed thanks to the persistence and perseverance of the students, she said that despite all their initiatives and persistence, they still need to work more to convince their peers and to negotiate with staff members to ensure that the implementation of the project remains successful:

The attitude changes for sure, and you will have eye-openers, but still, what if the committee does not check and monitor? That is the question: Will we revert and start over again? If the policing of the committee stops, if we do not use the checklist regularly, check the recycling bins, simply checking that the bins are placed as they should be, and have the right colour of plastic bag. Because they can easily have issues with the cleaners. If we do not check, I can tell you that within one month, we will go back to where we started. So, is it bringing along the changes? If we manage to arrive without the committee's input, with the standards that we have reached, that would be a success.

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

One of the greatest concerns for the EkoSkola teacher at Kemmuna Middle School is that, despite the committee members' perseverance and enthusiasm, if the school community does not change its attitude or does not care about the committee's efforts, the repercussions will be quite serious.

They get disheartened, and other than being afraid to voice themselves, my greatest fear is that they get disheartened, and the committee will dissolve. They start asking: What are we doing here, wasting our time? However, if you love the environment and you believe in what you are doing, you will continue. That is what I think. Perhaps, as a reevaluation, we need to consider whether we need to rethink our approach; maybe we need to refine our methods and assess how the school is addressing these issues.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

According to Roczen et al. (2014), students' appreciation for nature is the motivational force driving a person's change in behaviour toward a more sustainable lifestyle. This is where the committees seem to find the most difficulties. They work hard to increase awareness; however, they are still struggling to change their peers' attitudes. Saylor and Blumstein (2011) explain that today's society is moving away from cultivating a sense of community among young people and, conversely, is focusing more on individualism. The messages that role models, social media, and media are sending to our children are to consume as much as possible and no longer aim for moderation. In such a context, gaining wealth and power becomes more important than developing our place as essential members of society.

However, Lyndsey affirmed that, despite all odds, the EkoSkola committee at Kemmuna Middle School managed to bring about the necessary changes in the school administration's attitudes.

With me, the head consults, and she gives importance to what I tell her. But at first, it was not natural. For example, concerning the school pasta day, I had no say in it. I received an email like all the other educators and parents to bring our reusable containers on the day. I said yes! We reached our goal! It came naturally, without any pressure from EkoSkola. That is a success!

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

This finding is significant because it confirms Almazroa, Alotaibi, and Alrwaythi (2024)'s affirmation that when children identify problems and find solutions, they develop values and skills that promote more sustainable behaviours within their communities.

The Committee of Gaudos Secondary School demonstrated its commitment to raising awareness about preventing olive waste and, instead of stepping on them, teaching their peers to leave them for birds or to collect them.

Maria: Regarding the olives. When they see them on the floor, they need to collect them and not step on them. This way, you are not wasting them.

Briony: We have a lot of olive trees, and when olives grow, they will fall. The younger children need to learn that they need to collect them or place them in a corner for the birds. I think we need to work a lot on this.

(Committee Gaudos)

Roberta explained that when you see students' enthusiasm, teachers need to support them by changing their attitudes as well as their pedagogy:

Changes occur depending on the amount of time invested and how much support you give the committee. When I started, one of the biggest problems was to change my lessons as well, since I am a Science teacher. If I hadn't done that, if I had not been flexible in my work, and if I hadn't tried to amalgamate the Learning outcomes and find more time for the students to think and discuss, I think things would not have changed.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Chris agrees with Roberta and explained that when schools have active EkoSkola committees, adults need to demonstrate stronger leadership and serve as role models, not only to support the committees but also to show them that their initiatives are valuable and meaningful.

We lead by example- adults, teachers, LSEs, and staff members. If we need to throw away our waste, we should not just throw our waste carelessly, but we need to lead by example. We say it today, we say it tomorrow, and they see you doing it in some way or another. One fine day, the message is received, and it becomes habitual.

(Chris Head Filfla)

Similarly, Graziella affirmed that although some changes may appear straightforward and well explained by the committee members, resistance remains strong.

For example, we introduced the idea of paper banks. We recycled the trays. So if a girl makes a mistake, and before, when they made a mistake, they tore the page, they made a ball and threw it away. Now I remind them what they should do... and then they place it in the bank. The attitude does not change immediately, and I feel that we still experience resistance to change in certain things.

(Graziella, Link teacher Melita)

This affirmation helps us understand why committee members struggle to express their views and persuade their peers. Shaharuddin and Harun (2022) discussed the challenges in motivating and encouraging Generation Z children to participate in activities that involve cooperation and teamwork. Despite being creative and enthusiastic, Shaharuddin and Harun (2022) explain that Generation Z tends to criticize and challenge everything more. Additionally, increased technology use in their lives makes children more individualistic and creates difficulties in developing social and communication skills. Therefore, they suggest that by understanding how children see their world, educators can better comprehend their perspectives and find ways to prioritize change. However, this also indicates that, beyond

some educators' lack of interest in sharing power with students, peer cooperation posed an even greater challenge for the committee to move from level 1 to level 3 in Mitra's (2008) model.

4.4.4 Summary of Findings

From the data collected, it has been highlighted that:

- i) Committee members who participated in this research showed fifteen common qualities and attributes that helped them to voice themselves at the school, local, and international levels.
- ii) Committee members decided to work on EkoSkola projects because they love the natural environment and are eager to find solutions to issues that hinder SD.
- iii) According to research participants, committee members need to have high self-motivation and be perseverant if they want to overcome the difficulties faced when voicing their ideas and concerns with adults.
- iv) Everyone involved in ESD programs, like EkoSkola, should reflect on both successes and mistakes to ensure these programs are successfully implemented.

4.5 Theme 3: Challenges, barriers, and support (or lack of) received by committees

Most of the research participants' discourse also focused on the challenges and barriers EkoSkola committees faced when voicing their concerns and designing and implementing programs that promoted SD. Although committee members were seen as determined and perseverant, the committee members themselves, HOSs, Link teachers, and EkoSkola teachers mentioned several challenges and barriers that limited their performance and success, and these were categorized into eight sub-themes. These were:

- i) Lack of time available for committee members to meet
- ii) Lack of time for HOSs to listen to and meet the committees
- iii) Lack of financial support for the committees
- iv) Turnover of link teachers
- v) Lack of staff (both teaching and non-teaching) support
- vi) The fear of change
- vii) Lack of formal recognition from the Education system.
- viii) Students spend only two years studying in middle school

In this part, I will attempt to demonstrate that progressing through different levels in Mitra's (2008) model is not a linear process but rather highly dependent on the support provided by institutions and educators, as well as the number of barriers students face when implementing their projects.

4.5.1 Lack of time available for committee members to meet

One of the main aims of the NCF (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012) was to increase children's involvement in extracurricular activities and participation in sustainable development programs, and to give greater importance to citizenship education. However, despite all the propaganda, most of the time at school is devoted to formal education, with less time allocated to informal and non-formal education (McKeown and Hopkins, 2007; Harder et al., 2014). This includes EkoSkola committee meetings, which can only be held during breaks. Since students have limited time to meet and discuss issues during committee meetings, their opportunities for participation are also limited. Many schools have very short breaks, and the time to start meetings is often taken up, especially if the school building is large and students take time to arrive at the meeting place.

Although during the Ekoparliament, members of parliament talk about the importance of giving children sufficient opportunities to participate in EkoSkola programs and other ESD programs, this is not the case. There is a lot to be done. In discourse, we say a lot of things; however, in fact, we are always at war with time. This is not something that started lately. We have been talking about it. I have been involved in EkoSkola for the past sixteen/seventeen years. So, I am speaking from experience.

(John, EkoSkola teacher Filfla)

However, according to John, during the Ekoparliament sessions (annual meetings between members of the Maltese parliament and a number of students representing EkoSkola committees from different Maltese eco-schools), children frequently raise this with the politicians. In reality, it seems nothing has changed over the years. As noted by Giroux (2020) and John, children are not given enough time to build their own knowledge of the issues that are affecting their lives. Children are expected to contribute to bringing forward changes, but at the same time, educators and policymakers hinder their participation with the excuse that there is not enough time to discuss, problem solve, and conduct research on issues and themes that are not in the national syllabi.

The amount of time for students to ask and share their proposals is very limited. Although we cannot say that our children come to school tabula rasa, the time for them to bring forward creative ideas or to ask or try to think outside the box is limited. And then we pretend that they go to University and come up with innovative ideas that bring radical changes to systems? If that student didn't have any opportunities, from a young age, to talk and try to develop the ideas that cross one's mind and try to change, how can they develop that when going to tertiary education? At school, it is like always running against time.

(John, EkoSkola teacher Filfla)

Apple (2018) asserted that governments and policymakers intentionally design curricula that focus more on knowledge recall, with students monitored and controlled through examinations. Therefore, teachers, especially in secondary schools, often do not have enough time to teach skills and facilitate class discussions and group work. Darder and Miron (2016) and Giroux (2020) noted that, despite many politicians emphasizing the importance of children's voices and participation in decision-making, as I have also stated earlier, educators are not providing children with sufficient time to understand and address issues that create inequalities, injustice, and oppression. A neoliberal education tends to encourage children to focus more on achieving good examination results and on prioritizing personal achievement.

The Committees of Filfla Secondary School, Melita Secondary School, and Gaudos Secondary School. admitted that they had planned to undertake two projects, but due to insufficient time, these projects were put aside. According to the committees, these projects could have helped not only the school community but also the local community.

If we had continued our discussions and if we had more time, we could have worked on the project where the students could have come to school safely using their bicycles. This project could have reduced pollution and traffic. I am sure that we could have found a solution.

(Zack, Committee Filfla)

Similarly, Lisa explained how the thrift shop could have reduced waste and helped the committee to meet its goals:

For example, the thrift shop was always on our minds. We could have done it outside, where people could walk and see us, and we could have sold them our things. However, this cannot be done because of time, because obviously, children will be attending lessons, the assistant heads and teachers will be doing their work, and after school hours, most of us need to go home, eat, and do extracurricular activities. We need to price all the items and sort them. We need people who can spend a whole day managing the shop.

(Lisa, Committee Melita)

Lisa is giving evidence of how neoliberal education hinders students' opportunities to learn from extracurricular activities (such as this thrift shop project), and it is a lost opportunity for the whole community to find sustainable ways to reduce waste and control consumption.

Likewise, Maria stated that, even though her committee encountered similar barriers, they still decided to establish an online shop, knowing they would need a lot of time to set it up and get it running.

The original idea was to set up a thrift shop. We were thinking of taking everything to school, but then we needed a place to put the objects. Then we thought of an online catalogue, using a Padlet and advising the school. They send us the photos of the goods that they want to sell, and then we upload everything online and on

the noticeboard. Whoever wants to buy something will then see the prices and send us. The idea is still there, but until we speak to the head, it will take a lot of time and work to start.

(Maria, Committee Gaudos)

Similar to Lisa, Noella pointed out that the thrift shop was important not only for raising funds but also for helping the local community reduce waste and pollution.

The bazaar was important not only for fundraising, but we all know that at home we have a lot of things that we do not use, and we end up throwing them away or just keeping them there without knowing what to do with them. So we thought that this could have been an opportunity to create a stronger community where we can help each other with things that are not used by others. We thought that this project would have helped us become closer to each other, and it could also have helped us collect funds and reduce pollution.

(Noella, Committee Melita)

This finding is very similar to what Cassar Cordina (2015) found from her questionnaire results. There is a major barrier for EkoSkola committees not only to meet and plan, but also to organise practical activities that promote sustainability at both the school and local levels. Although the literature is limited on the impact of ESD-related extracurricular activities on children's mental well-being and academic performance, Hughes, Cao, and Kwok (2016) and Fredricks and Eccles (2008) examined how students benefited from extracurricular activities organized at their schools or in the community. Hughes, Cao, and Kwok (2016) and Fredricks and Eccles (2008), both conducted longitudinal studies and have found that extracurricular activities not only give kids and teens a way to fill their free time (preventing engagement in potentially inappropriate activities), but also can improve adolescents' mental well-being, reduce mental health problems, boost social development, help participants learn various life skills, and showed a link between extracurricular participation and better academic achievement.

4.5.2 Lack of time for HOSs to listen to and meet the committees

One of the main barriers is the lack of time for the HOS to work and discuss projects with the committees. Carmen explained that, since she was new to the school, several issues had to be addressed. In her opinion, the link teacher was reliable and could effectively lead EkoSkola, even though during that academic year, Carmen admitted that EkoSkola was not a priority for her and her school's SLT.

John continued to explain that HOS tend to do a lot of office work and attend many meetings. At the same time, they are finding it very difficult to meet children, engage with them during classroom activities, and give them time to share their ideas:

Due to pressures from above and reform fatigue, which led to a good number of teachers and heads leaving the sector, what students want in most cases is not done. It is not because those who are leading do not want to dedicate more time

to students, but rather that we are going through a lot of changes and reforms, and there is no time for the things a head of school would like to do. Whatever they say and do, if no one insists on a long-term plan where the heads of schools will have more time to dedicate to children and reduce tasks that can be avoided, then things will not change.... Many heads whom I meet tell me and argue that they do not have adequate clerical assistance, so most of the work is done by themselves. This is across the board...

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

According to John, the HOSs did not attend the committees not because they did not want to, but because they felt other things were more important. While reflecting on her contribution to her school's EkoSkola committee, Doris said that the following school year, she was determined to allocate more time to meet with students throughout the year.

I believe there is room for improvement when it comes to the committee's involvement. Yes, I need to have more frequent meetings, for sure, more than around four times a year. If I have enough time, or they have enough time because the breaks are quite short.

(Doris Head Gaudos)

Khloe and Sophie shared their thoughts about the issue of time management that not only affects the number of meetings they have with the head but also their own time:

Khloe: For us, it is impossible because we only meet during the breaks. At that time, the head might either have a meeting or we need to plan for a project.

Sophie: At the beginning of the year, we spoke to her about our ideas, and she saw what we were trying to do. Then, the teacher will talk to her and share our ideas.

Khloe: The teacher might not have a lesson, so she can meet the head and talk about our ideas.

(Committee Kemmuna)

Although the Kemmuna Middle School EkoSkola committee was pleased that the link teacher met with the HOS and shared ideas, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argue that when given the right opportunities, students can identify the specific strategies and situations that are not working. The fact that the EkoSkola committee of Kemmuna Middle school has previously expressed concern about fewer students being interested in joining the EkoSkola committee and initiatives, could be attributed to the lack of support the committee received from the head and SLT. The fact that the HOS was not very involved in EkoSkola conveyed to the school community that it was not a priority and that there were other important things to focus on. Mitra (2008) also emphasized that, in similar situations, students' voice initiatives become fragile, and there is a greater reliance on adult mediation.

Being constructive, reasonable, and insightful, children can be perceptive and confident in finding weaknesses within the system. However, if children are not given enough time to

share their perspectives and express themselves, their observations remain unvoiced and unheard.

4.5.3 Lack of financial support and resources for the committees

School finance has always been a crucial issue on the agenda of HOSs and authorities, as adequate funding enables schools to invest in additional resources and services that enhance teaching and learning (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico, 2016). How money is invested and in which areas money is invested can also indicate where the SLT is focusing its priorities (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico, 2016). Stephania explained that it is essential for committees to have a financial backup to support their projects. Moreover, it is very challenging for the committee to organize fundraising activities in a short period while also working on their school projects.

The biggest issue is finding financial support, especially for the projects they want to undertake. As you know, school expenses are high, and very limited amounts are provided to the committee. So, they need to see how they can organize fundraising activities to collect funds. But that is time-consuming. So that is a big constraint they are experiencing. They want to do much more, but there is not enough time for that.

(Stephania, EkoSkola teacher Melita)

However, Stephania affirmed that, despite the lack of time to collect funds, it is also important that the committee learn to manage their money well when their budget is small and when funds are scarce.

So, there are times when the school comes to a point: we need funds, we need this, please do this. At times, finance, whether available or lacking, can influence the decisions. However, here we are dealing with the economic aspect. So, they need to say ok, we have a problem; we need financial support. If we do not get this support, we cannot solve the problem. So let us work on it so we can get funds from somewhere.

(Stephania EkoSkola Teacher Melita)

Interestingly, Stephania notes that, despite the lack of funds being a challenge, children should also learn to collect money and use it effectively. When I asked the EkoSkola committee of Kemmuna Middle School whether there were any projects that they wanted to do but could not continue, Sophie mentioned the Greenwall project.

Yes, the Greenwall, because it was too expensive. To get the pots, we had to organise many activities to then get the funds. We also needed water. It was a great idea, but we needed drip irrigation for water, so it wasn't something you could do in one year. You need time and money.

(Sophie, Committee, Kemmuna)

However, in reality, when the committee initially started the project to reduce costs, they used plastic bottles instead of pots. They found another barrier: their peers were not cooperating and, intentionally or unintentionally, broke everything.

Gemma: We tried the pots with the plastic bottles, but it didn't work out.

Me: But why didn't it work out?

Gemma: Because the pots were not fixed on the floor, you could have removed them. So they started kicking them.

Sophie: We advised them, and we always advised them, but they were not interested. They literally kicked them from one place to another, or they hit them with the ball. So we stopped working on it.

(Committee, Kemmuna)

According to Ann, one of the biggest mistakes the committee might be making is failing to secure sufficient financial support and resources from the local councils. Ann stated that local councils can support by using their resources to initiate new projects involving the local community.

I think that Schools are more accustomed to using their own resources, and at the same time, they are not utilizing resources that can come from the local communities. It could be that this is a church school, and children are coming from different catchment areas. If you have a local primary school, there is a greater chance of asking for support from the local council, and the support is given. But since it is a church school and it is a secondary school, children come from different catchment areas, so the involvement of the local council is much less.

(Ann, EkoSkola teacher Gaudos)

Although Ann is giving the impression that the committees were at fault because they were not able to earn funds from the local councils, in reality, taking the example of Kemmuna Middle School's greenwall project, it was in the best interest of the local council to support the EkoSkola committee because the success of the greenwall project at their school could have been easily replicated in their locality.

It is unclear why the local councils of the localities where the participant schools are located do not actively participate in EkoSkola projects. This is very similar to what Schroder, Wals, and van Koppen (2020) reported for their Dutch school participant. The local council's lack of involvement gave students fewer opportunities to solve local problems and to bring the needed changes for a better social and natural environment within the locality.

Although there is very limited literature on how EkoSkola projects could be funded, UNESCO (2014) emphasizes that governments need to invest in educational initiatives, especially ESD programs, that promote social equity, social justice, and lifelong learning. UNESCO (2014) adds that a wise investment in ESD yields better outcomes with long-lasting effects.

4.5.4 Turnover of link teachers

One issue raised by the participating EkoSkola teachers is that, in many schools, especially state schools, the link teachers change frequently. In Malta, many HOSs opt to assign this duty to NQTs (Newly qualified teachers) because it involves a lot of work, and NQTs must complete the PMPD (Performance Management and Professional Development) to obtain their teacher's warrant. As part of their responsibilities, NQTs are encouraged to participate in school extra-curricular activities. At the end of the school year, HOSs evaluate NQTs' performance and recommend (or not) their confirmation. Consequently, many NQTs might be willing to take on the role of link teachers even if they are not very interested in the subject. Additionally, another issue with NQTs was reported.

In many committees, the link teacher is an NQT whom the head assigned to the role because no one else came forward. In most cases, these teachers will eventually become redundant and leave, so everything needs to be done again.

(Ann, EkoSkola Teacher Gaudos)

Marisa discussed the situation at Kemmuna Middle School, where the school and the committee faced many changes. Similar to Ann, she mentioned the challenges of finding link teachers willing to support the committees despite the extra workload.

In many cases, the link teachers are NQTs. Some teachers do not want to form part of EkoSkola because there is a lot of work to do, and they tell us. So, it is given to a new NQT. Then the following year, when the NQT has become familiar with EkoSkola, they tell you that they do not want to continue, and you need to give the tasks to someone else. So, this is what we are experiencing.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

John views this from another perspective, explaining that in reality, staff turnover is not always something negative. A teacher who changes schools still carries the skills and knowledge needed to successfully run the program.

So, in this school, there is new energy, and there are people who bring new ideas. There is the challenge that teachers are changing from one year to another, and teachers who move, but we always say those who are leaving are carrying with them their positive knowledge to other schools. New people who are coming are giving their input. I am happy with the situations where link teachers brought with them experiences from other committees in which they worked in the past. They would then meet together and share their ideas brought about when they were link teachers of other committees in other schools. Then they meet and encourage each other, sharing not only knowledge but also enthusiasm.

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

Although none of the committee members raised a concern about the Link teacher changeover, the three participant EkoSkola teachers did. Therefore, it is worth studying how

link teachers could affect students' motivation, agency, and empowerment to voice themselves and participate in decision-making with educators and SLT members. Ann, Marisa, and John's concerns about turnover among link teachers align with Cassar Cordina's (2015) findings. If educators' awareness and knowledge of sustainable development are low, it becomes more difficult to find teachers interested in supporting the committees or serving as link teachers. Although studies examining the effects of link teachers on the EkoSkola committee are hard to find, several researchers have examined the relationship between educators' personalities and students' performance in school projects (Atteberry, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2013; Kim, Dar-Nimrod, and MacCann, 2018). Then found that when an educator shows interest in the subject, is enthusiastic about working, supports students, and has a very positive attitude, students look up to them and are easily motivated and encouraged. This was confirmed by Kim, Dar-Nimrod, and MacCann (2018), who found that three important teachers' personality characteristics — conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability — helped students feel more academically and emotionally supported and experience higher expectations for their academic performance. Although their results did not confirm that teachers' personalities affected students' academic performance, positive personalities did positively impact the socio-emotional outcomes. Kim et al. (2018) also showed that some students might feel more comfortable working with outgoing teachers, whereas others might find it more difficult to work with teachers who are less understanding and less positive in addressing students' needs.

4.5.5 Lack of staff (both teaching and non-teaching) support

The interviews and focus groups revealed that committee members sometimes encounter unexpected challenges when starting new projects. Securing approval from the HOS alone does not guarantee a successful launch and implementation; all staff, including non-teaching personnel, must be supportive and actively contribute to the project's success.

Sometimes, the problem is due to a lack of communication. For example, the committee meets, a decision is made, and discussions are done with the SLT, but then the SLT does not communicate with the other staff members. For example, there are cleaners and handymen, and there might be friction. If they already have friction with the head and they do not follow the instructions given by the SLT, there will be miscommunication.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

According to Roberta, through EkoSkola, children need to learn to be persuasive in their speech to gain the support of all stakeholders.

So, if you do not involve the cleaners, if you don't tell them what you are doing, if you do not have everyone on board, you will have trouble. You need the whole pyramid of people if you want to succeed. The committee cannot work alone and encapsulate... An example is that of the organic bins. The committee wanted to separate the waste, so we introduced the organic bins to make compost with it.

We did the compost bins, but we forgot to involve the cleaners. As soon as we wanted to start its implementation, it was a disaster. No one wanted to collect the organic waste. The cleaners refused to touch the bins and didn't want to collect them.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Roberta here highlights an important issue her school is encountering. Sometimes, the cleaners are unaware of the initiatives taken at school, and many do not speak English, making it very difficult for them to communicate with the teaching staff and children. In addition, as Jeroen, Janssen, and Wubbels (2018) emphasized, if students are not given the space and time to convey their project's vision, purposes, and benefits, adults might doubt its feasibility. This is because they find it difficult to comprehend the goals, passion, and planning behind student-led projects.

All four committees noted that they sometimes had to work harder to persuade adults to support them and follow their initiatives. After analysing the interviews and focus groups, it appears that the committees of state schools faced more challenging situations in convincing adults. They claimed that some teachers were not supportive and that others ignored their efforts to improve the school environment.

Cook-Sather (2015) argued that, since schools are built on prediction, control, and management, anything that challenges these premises is difficult to achieve within the context of formal education. If educators and adults do not value the proposed changes and thus do not respond to or attend to students' needs, such changes are short-lived. In this scenario, when support is limited or absent, students' voices tend to remain at level 1 (of Mitra's model), that is, they are only heard in a tokenistic way (Mitra, 2008). Conversely, if structural and relational support is in place, there is an increase in opportunities for students to progress to level 3 of Mitra's (2008) model when participating in decision-making.

4.5.6 The fear of change

Rebecca discussed the challenges her committee faced in convincing the school community to change attitudes and practices.

I think that adults are those who are mostly afraid of change. Because even a simple change in the system, a small change, can create anxiety. So, at times, we tend to, unfortunately, silence them, giving the impression that we know more than they do. We are the adults; we know how to do things, and what children are saying cannot be done, so we silence them. (Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

Rebecca's statement is important because she acknowledges that children are silenced due to adults' unwillingness to change. They are comfortable with their current living situation. Mitra (2008) similarly stated that challenging the status quo can heighten adults' fear of the unknown, who, in turn, silence children to prevent them from bringing about change. Lomba-Portela, Domínguez-Lloria, and Pino-Juste (2022) reported results similar to those of this study, showing that educators in state schools tend to exhibit greater resistance to change

than those in non-state schools. In addition, these authors also claimed that age and years of experience correlated with greater resistance to change. The factors that most influenced resistance were continuous policy changes and the perception of excessive or increased work. Rebecca asserts that if children are not listened to, or listened to in a tokenistic manner, they stop contributing to decision-making and, as a result, educators lose the opportunity to understand their students' perspectives when tackling important issues.

Children have their perspectives, and they have very good ideas, but at times, our reactions silence them. The more time passes by, they step back from sharing their ideas because if today you shared your idea and I silenced you, you would then say that your ideas are not good, so next time you will not share anything else.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

Therefore, in these situations, educators become the oppressors who, instead of encouraging children to participate, discourage them from taking risks and innovating. Both Mitra (2008) and Psaila (2017) noted that adults and educators often assume they know what is best for their students, and despite students' struggles to make their voices heard, they are unconsciously silenced, unacknowledged, or not listened to. Rebecca emphasised that when silencing children, they become discouraged from participating in decision-making and give children the impression that changes are undesirable and should be avoided.

Rebecca explained that when staff were not monitored by the EkoSkola committee, in many cases they did not change their attitudes and continued to adopt outdated, unsustainable practices.

Why didn't the staff get the reusable cups with them? If we have afternoon Christmas drinks, why are we still using disposable cups? So, we are working with children to use the reusables, and then we don't do the same. Ok, you might tell me, children are not there watching. So? I think that we are not taking this issue of single-use plastics seriously enough. Even children told me about this. They separate the waste in different bins, and then the cleaners come and throw everything in one bag. Why? Even about the tuck shop project, ok, it was successful, but the fruit is still packed in plastic containers, even bread. When I supervise the yard, children still have their pizza in paper bags, so in reality, we have indeed done a lot of work, but in my opinion, we have not yet reached our goals.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

This lack of support can be viewed from different perspectives. Although educators may not openly criticize student-led projects, they find it difficult to change their habits and behaviours. The belief that changes might be superficial and not long-lasting tends to discourage educators from supporting their students when they are not present. Additionally, it also shows that adults do not truly understand the goals and purpose of the SD initiatives, but rather support students to avoid discouraging them or risking the positive relationships they have built with them.

Katie also reflected on the role of the parents in supporting school initiatives. Parents often take a long time to grasp changes, and sometimes they continue to choose the easiest path because changes can disrupt their way of life.

Parental support is there. We organize meetings with them, and we also brief them about projects. For example, we tell them that next week is pizza day and insist that everyone bring a container from home. This part is lacking. We send a lot of reminders, and on the day, children come to school without the containers. It is true that they have now reached secondary school level, and parents want them to be autonomous. But if the parent remind their children to take the container with them! That would surely help. I think it is more of having a hectic lifestyle, so the priorities are different. (Katie Head Melita)

Hill and Tyson (2014) argue that parental encouragement stimulates a positive attitude toward learning. The findings from my interviews support Hill and Tyson's reasoning that parents can manifest their support for their children's initiatives by providing the necessary resources, offering verbal affirmations, and showing interest in their children's progress. With parental support, children tend to increase their confidence in their ability to succeed.

4.5.7 Lack of formal recognition from the Maltese education system.

One of the biggest barriers that link teachers face when supporting the committees is the lack of time to prepare and organize. They are not allocated any specific time in their timetables to prepare for EkoSkola initiatives. It is done in addition to their work, reducing the time they spend working with the children on new projects.

When it comes to opportunities, I think we are behind. I do not have enough time. As a link teacher, I thank God that I am a science teacher, and I manage to link the curriculum with EkoSkola. I feel that as a link teacher and as a teacher, there is a lack of time at one's disposal. If we had more time with the students, we would come up with more innovative things and solutions to the different problems we are faced with.

(Roberta, Link Teacher Gaudos)

Here, Roberta is expressing her frustration that, despite her belief that the committee's work brought the needed changes, the school still could not make the necessary arrangements to give the committee more time to meet and discuss initiatives. She was concerned that she did not have enough time to meet with the committee, assist them with problem-solving, and embark on new projects. In addition, Roberta emphasizes that EkoSkola involves a lot of additional work on the link teachers.

There is a lot of work to be done, and time becomes a significant issue. It is not part of the formal curriculum, nor part of the syllabus; there is a limit to how much you can link it to the curriculum. We did some because we went on media, we did some during science lessons because I teach science, we did on litter, but yes, it involves a lot of work.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

Similarly, Elaine affirms that the amount of work link teachers need to do could drastically reduce the committee's potential to work on other projects:

Children have a lot of energy and potential, but there is no time dedicated to teachers to do this job. This work is done over and above our work. This is a big obstacle. Lack of time for teachers and students.

(Elaine, Link teacher Melita)

John explained that this is an urgent issue requiring attention. He compared the incentives given to teachers with special duties or who have other roles at school (such as librarians) to the absence of such incentives for link teachers supporting EkoSkola committees:

Currently, ESD is not recognized, despite being one of the cross-curricular themes. There aren't any people who are taking ESD where it belongs. There is a lot of discourse and surveys to understand how much teachers are consulted and appreciated, year after year, and from every survey, we get the same results. I will give you some examples. If you are a teacher with the National Literacy Agency, there are numerous opportunities and resources available. If you are a health and safety teacher, you will have half the load, if you are a librarian, you also have half the load. If you are doing ESD, which is crucial, and this is said even at a political level, everyone says that it is so important, you do not have anything.

(John, EkoSkola Teacher Filfla)

This is concerning, as the impression is that how much an EkoSkola committee participates in initiatives and takes part in new projects depends a lot on the availability and opportunities the link teacher has to prepare and organise the committee meetings. If the teacher is very busy, the committee's work could slow down. According to John, this is all due to the lack of recognition the Maltese Education system gives to EkoSkola link teachers. Although the NCF (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012) acknowledges the concept of sustainability, policymakers and politicians lack clarity about its practical application within the education system. In the absence of a clear vision of what sustainability encompasses, policymakers refrain from assigning resources and adopt policies that promote ESD programs in schools (UNESCO, 2014). In addition, because EkoSkola meetings are not timetabled, students do not have sufficient time (during their short mid-day breaks) to prepare new initiatives, conduct research, problem-solve, and think through solutions. On the other hand, the link teachers need to find time to do such additional work that EkoSkola entails.

The link teachers at Melita Secondary School tried to request some allocated time for EkoSkola from their school, but such recognition was not granted.

Fiona: We asked whether it was possible to have a teacher with a reduced load. Like librarians, they have part of their load as librarians and another part teaching. Like that, we will have more time.

Josette: It is not only here. This situation is found everywhere. However, some schools have longer breaks, and that is good.

Graziella: Some schools have a forty-five-minute break. They have more time... Forty-five minutes are equivalent to a whole lesson.

(Link teachers Melita)

If there is no allocated time, even if the government wants children's participation and allows them to contribute to the national strategy, teachers still cannot miss their lessons to coordinate the discussions. According to Pace (2010), educational authorities might view sustainability as an added burden rather than as an essential part of a holistic education. This notion restricts schools' opportunities to establish essential sustainability curricula and often disregards sustainability within formal educational frameworks. Due to the lack of formal recognition, link teachers often shift between roles, leaving them with limited time to effectively engage students in sustainability projects. This is also emphasized by Saylan and Blumstein (2011), who noted that discussing the importance of learning about the environment and living sustainably is useless when the system fails to appropriately recognize educators working with students in ESD programs. Ann adds that, despite policymakers inviting children to provide feedback on national policies, link teachers are struggling to find time to finish the syllabus (of the subject they teach) and, as a result, tend to be reluctant to allow children to participate in these national debates.

For example, if you want students to come out of their school to discuss and give their feedback on the national strategy, where such feedback reaches policymakers, the teacher cannot lose a whole day of lessons... EkoSkola is not only a school committee, but it is a national thing. Children need to discuss issues not only at their school but also between schools and at a national level. The link teachers should have that support and incentives.

(Ann, EkoSkola teacher Gaudos)

Doris explains that even children want an ESD lesson on their timetable to discuss and work on these projects.

Time is a big issue. Their [children's] dream is that they will have a lesson allocated to them. They dream that EkoSkola will be part of their timetable. It will no longer be a voluntary thing, but they will have time to discuss and do things that they enjoy doing.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

The fact that the participant students are recognising the importance of integrating ESD within formal education confirms the UN DESD (UNESCO,2014)'s claims that educators need to make sure that children have more time:

- i) to learn about SD initiatives,

- ii) to research different environmental and social issues
- iii) to problem-solve school, local, and national issues related to SD, and
- iv) to develop social responsibility amongst each other.

The students at Gaudos Secondary School tried to overcome this barrier by encouraging more informal education and seeking permission to talk to their peers during the form teacher session or between classes.

Even during the class teacher time. During the break, we have some time with the class teacher, and we discuss with her and among ourselves. Sometimes, we use PowerPoint to explain. In reality, to explain what you are doing is not enough. We found that after some time, we needed to change our methods. We realized that we needed to explain to the students what the benefits are, how we can help the school, and how we can help them, and then we will have a better response. They will, in return, help us more, and we will have more cooperation.

(Maria, Committee Gaudos)

Federica emphasized the importance of teachers supporting and understanding the significance of their work. At their school, EkoSkola became part of their culture, and teachers consistently supported them whenever the committee needed to share ideas or teach new SD practices.

When we need it, we always have teachers' support, and if we need to make an assembly, they try to find time to organize the assembly. We always find ways how we can share the word with all the students. When we want an assembly, teachers organize a special assembly and make a quick announcement to help us.

(Federica, Committee Gaudos)

Despite the Gaudos Secondary School committee finding all the necessary support from their teachers, informal and non-formal education still cannot replace formal education. UNESCO (2014) highlights the importance of teaching ESD across curricula and the need for governments to embed SD within the curriculum. When ESD is integrated into the curriculum, governments are more likely to grant formal recognition. However, Apple (2013) argues that a neoliberal curriculum does not promote thinking and actions that reduce consumerism and consumption, nor the more efficient use of resources. As long as the lack of recognition from education systems persists, such barriers continue to create boundaries between Mitra's (2008) levels, making it harder for students to reach level 3 in participation in decision-making.

4.5.8 A common issue experienced only in state middle schools

Participants in Kemmuna Middle School discussed an issue faced by all committees working in state middle schools. Students in these schools spend only two years before advancing to state secondary schools. As a result, committee members have a very short time to

collaborate, making it difficult to maintain continuity. Church secondary schools do not face this problem because they do not have middle schools.

In a school like ours, where you will only spend two years, the newcomers are the youngest, and the following year, they become the oldest. So, to pass on good practices, it becomes very tiring. This is one of the reasons why a middle school takes more time to get a green flag. Committee members say that members change quickly, and they are right. However, when doing an action plan, your targets cannot be long-term. The targets need to be small. You cannot be over-ambitious because you only have two years. You cannot project for five years. This is problematic in middle schools.

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

Additionally, the link teacher mentioned that each year, a significant amount of time is spent training and informing the new committee members, who make up roughly half of the committee.

When it comes to sharing good practices, passing on becomes very tiring. Every year, you need to start with a new group. The older ones cannot explain to the younger students. This becomes very tiring in middle schools.

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

Vassallo's (2021) results do not agree with what Lynsey said. While Lynsey said that passing on good practices to new students was very tiring and that new students might be reluctant to join, Vassallo found that when children were intrinsically motivated to participate in EkoSkola (even if they faced numerous challenges related to the adaptation to a new environment and understanding of how the new system worked), the benefits outweighed the barriers especially if the new students have already been EkoSkola committee members when they were in primary school setting. The Kemmuna Middle School committee also expressed concerns that when committee members reach year eight and leave, they might not be replaced by the new cohort, which could lead to EkoSkola projects being discontinued, making all their hard work go to waste. This practice exists in Maltese state schools, but there is limited local research addressing this issue. However, because committee members are constantly changing in state middle schools, maintaining continuity with long-term projects is very challenging. Additionally, experienced committee members transitioning from year 7 to year 8 often lack the opportunity to meet and train new members after moving to secondary schools. As a result, a significant amount of time must be dedicated to training new members, who in most cases make up half of the new committee.

4.5.9 Summary of findings

According to the research participants:

The main barrier to a successful implementation of ESD programs is time. The participants were concerned with the limited amount of time available for:

- i) The HOSs to meet the committees.
- ii) The committees to meet and make important decisions on the projects.
- iii) The implementation of EkoSkola projects

From the collected data, I have identified other barriers that inhibit the success of the EkoSkola projects and the listening to students' voices. These were:

- i) The lack of financial support
- ii) The changes in the link teachers
- iii) Lack of staff support, and
- iv) The fear of change

4.6 Theme 4: Promotion and outreach

4.6.1 Choosing and identifying projects and initiatives

There was a shared understanding among the four committees and research participants that the main goal of EkoSkola programs is to raise awareness of various social and environmental issues faced by different communities. Time constraints and limited resources seem to push EkoSkola committees to prioritize projects that produce tangible results.

I always visit them at the beginning of the academic year and ask them to mention off-hand, before doing an audit, before going around the school, without asking your peers, off-hand. Mention one thing that is bothering you in your school regarding the environment, and things that you can deal with. They always mention things that they can see. Things that are tangible in their eyes.

(Stephania EkoSkola Teacher Melita)

It seems that committees tend to prefer selecting projects related to environmental issues, like making the school environment cleaner, rather than campaigning against specific behaviours that cause oppression, which could lead to anger and misunderstandings among the majority group. During interviews and focus groups, it was perceived that when committees promoted environmental education rather than citizenship education, this was less risky and more likely to gain support from parents and the local community. This approach also helped the committees improve communication with educators and provided more opportunities to lead their school community when implementing their ESD projects, thereby helping them move from level 1 to level 3 in Mitra's three-tiered model (Mitra, 2008).

When the link teachers at Melita Secondary School described their projects, they proudly spoke about the long-term effects of their EkoSkola project, which focused on waste reduction and environmental protection. According to them, these projects not only have a lasting impact on the students but also on their parents.

Elaine: I think we are gradually having an impact. For example, we had a concert, and the parents who attended the activity brought the cups with them, so it is gradually entering our mindset.

Fiona: And even we are getting reusable cups. We also try.

Elaine: Even students who leave the school continue with this practice; you see them voicing themselves at sixth form, for example. So, you would say it is something that affected them.

(Link teachers Melita)

John explained that committees who focused on growing crops during the pandemic (COVID-19) had the chance to realize the importance of cultivating their vegetables and simultaneously advocate against the destruction of farmland for more property development. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many children were unaware of how fruits and vegetables were grown and harvested.

They managed to amalgamate CCP [lower academic classes] with EkoSkola to increase awareness during the pandemic. They started to grow vegetables and products, and at the same time, they increased their awareness of the importance of Maltese agriculture and how much we need to take care of our farmers. As everyone knows, as time passes by, the Maltese farmers are decreasing in number, and during the pandemic, we need to import from abroad. However, this was not always possible, so we needed the Maltese farmers.

(John, EkoSkola teacher Filfla)

This confirmed what Tonuk and Kayihan (2013) stated about the importance of schools offering opportunities for students to experience nature, build a relationship with it, and connect with the external environment. In addition, these activities increased interest in the subject and made more students ready to participate. Although John's statement highlighted the lack of environmental literacy among students, Chiras (2008) and UNESCO (2014), in the UN DESD, showed that when committees focus solely on the theoretical aspect on protecting the natural environment and the management of wastes without involving themselves actively in projects that bring change in their immediate environment, the risk is that environmental issues may never be truly resolved.

4.6.2 Doing research

The four committees found that understanding the issues affecting people's lives required research, with most of the information coming from their schools and local communities. John explained how the committees valued understanding the nature of the issues by listening to people's experiences and then taking appropriate actions.

When they chose the theme of Hunger and no Poverty, and when Malta was doing economically well, everyone mentioned the GDP and how well our economy was

doing. Through the surveys that students themselves have conducted at their homes, with their families, and in their communities, they found that there was poverty. Whether it was relative poverty or poverty is not important because, in the end, they found that there was poverty, and they tried to do their best to collect food for soup kitchens, food banks, and animal sanctuaries.

(John, EkoSkola teacher Filfla)

This is very related to hooks' (2000) argument that media and politicians tend to portray a 'pseudo' reality, that is, giving the impression that there are no issues related to inequality, injustice, and respect towards women, but in reality, this is not true. hooks (2000) emphasised that only by meeting people and learning from their experiences can one truly understand their suffering and the causes of injustice. hooks (2000) also explains that children have few opportunities to conduct research and investigate the causes of social issues; therefore, they have less space to think critically about the situations that contribute to oppression. However, this does not mean that researching the causes of environmental issues and finding solutions to waste management would not help students acquire the necessary skills to research more complex social issues later on.

The EkoSkola committee of Kemmuna Middle School took the opportunity to learn more about the waste created by families when they used wrapping paper during Christmas festivities. They began by questioning how much wrapping paper was used during the holiday season, and they ended up researching not only waste production but also the types of materials wrapping paper was made from and how it could have been reused or recycled properly.

Sophie: We did research on the use of wrapping paper. We learnt about the amount of wrapping paper used in Malta. In fact, we did an activity where we filled a class with wrapping paper collected from children attending the school. Then we filled the class with all the wrapping paper, and when we saw all that wrapping paper, we decided to do some research. From that research, we realised how much wrapping paper was used and which was recyclable and which was not.

Me: And how did you present this information to the rest of the school?

Matthias: We wrote an article and presented it to YRE. And as a school, every class entered the room filled with wrapping paper, and a member of the committee presented the results of the research on how much waste families generate, so every class had the opportunity to visit and learn.

(Committee Kemmuna)

The fact that they shared their research results with the whole school community helped the school community become aware of how much waste they generated and how much it impacted their lives and the natural environment.

Brenda explained why the committee places great importance on research when identifying the themes on which they work.

Brenda: We normally start research from the very beginning, identifying the themes. Then we do research to find the best solution to solve the problem. Normally, we do surveys with the students and teachers. Then we give presentations, ask for feedback, and see what other schools are doing.

(Committee Gaudos)

For Brenda, this strategy is very important because it helps the committee identify the major issues at school and find the most appropriate ways to address them in a whole-school approach.

Conducting research was important for the committees because it not only enhanced their knowledge and skills about the subject but also enabled them to make informed decisions and take the necessary steps to improve the environmental situation at their school. This supports Wojcik and Mondry's (2020) assertion that when students back up their initiatives with research, they are viewed as more credible, even by adults who are, at times, more skeptical.

4.6.3 Promotion of projects and work

All the participants explained that successful projects need effective promotion not only within their school communities but also among local and international communities. The committees promoted their projects at two levels: first, at the school level, and then at the community level.

Promotion at a school level to create a Whole School Approach (WSA)

The committees confirmed that the most common way to promote a project was through school assemblies. For Katie, participating in school assemblies is a chance to help students learn how to speak in public and communicate their message.

They are given different opportunities to participate in assemblies to voice themselves, and we are giving them training for public speaking to help them feel comfortable when they need to participate in national forums. They will not be shy or afraid to participate.

(Katie, Head Melita)

For Katie, since children have limited time to speak in public and develop the skills to persuade and motivate their peers, taking this opportunity is essential. Although schools do not teach students how to speak publicly, giving a presentation at the school assembly provides them with valuable experience and opportunities to improve their ability to express themselves in front of peers who may not always be ready to listen.

Additionally, according to Carmen, these assemblies can help the school community understand the committee's significance to the school.

Because I think one needs to distinguish between knowing that the committee exists and knowing why the committee is important. So, we must promote all the things we do in EkoSkola.

(Carmen, Head Kemmuna)

Carmen's use of the pronoun 'we' instead of 'them' indicated her strong commitment to promoting the EkoSkola project. This is important because, as I mentioned earlier, when students have their HOS's support (which was lacking at Kemmuna Middle School), the chances of success increase. In this case, Carmen aimed to align her voice with the committee's to send a unified message.

The Kemmuna Middle School EkoSkola committee identified another mechanism that, according to the link teacher, is more effective than assemblies and has a much longer-lasting impact on the entire community.

Sometimes we do class interventions, which seem more effective than assemblies. During assemblies, we announce something, explaining what we are doing, the targets, what we have identified, research results, etc. Here, assemblies are effective but with class interventions; for example, using the form-time, we can focus on particular form groups. In twos, committee members go to a class, and they do a presentation to every class. For example, we worked on waste separation. We found that wipes were thrown in the recycling bin, and we know that that is wrong. We tackle school-based issues and problems. It works a lot.

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

This illustrates that classroom interventions helped the EkoSkola committee to focus on specific targets for each year group. By presenting in different classrooms, committee members gained the opportunity to share their research and express their ideas and solutions. Although there is no research on the impact of class interventions by EkoSkola committee members on the implementation of ESD programs, Chapman and Sharma (2001) and Falzon (2015) provided sufficient evidence that when teachers conduct classroom interventions focused on environmental and social issues in schools and their localities, students learn more and become more participative in initiating the necessary changes.

The Melita Secondary School committee also used MS Teams, where the entire school community, including students, teachers, and other staff, was continuously updated on the committee's work and future initiatives.

We write a post on Teams; for example, we upload posters and explain the activities. For example, inform the school about a marathon walk or tell them we will have a clean-up activity next week. Apart from advising during the assembly, they also write on Teams.

(Noella, Committee Melita)

Although the school administration and teachers administer this MS Team, the EkoSkola committee also uses it to disseminate information and to announce important events.

They speak during the assembly, make announcements, and so on. However, nowadays, they use other means that their peers of the same age follow, so we support them by putting a post on the school community team.

(Josette, Link teacher Melita)

This shows that at Melita Secondary School, the committee successfully secured a space within the school platform to voice their opinions and promote their ideas. This enables the whole school community to receive the messages, and everyone is informed on how the school community can show more sustainable behaviours.

The situation at Kemmuna Middle School appears somewhat different from that at Melita Secondary School, as although EkoSkola encourages children to collaborate effectively, Lynsey feels they still need to improve its promotion at the school level.

We did a roster, where committee members were divided into twos, and they were all informed about what they had to say when they met their peers in the classrooms. We started with those who were very shy, ... and then they would end up presenting alone in front of others. You would say that is empowerment! ... However, I still feel that we have not yet promoted enough of our targets. Children out there might not know. And if you question them [the students] about which areas the EkoSkola committee is working on, they might not tell you!

(Lynsey, Link teacher Kemmuna)

Lynsey's statement reveals that, in reality, because the committee failed to promote their initiatives effectively, their peers are unaware of what the committee is actually doing. This indicates that there is no clear motivation or reason to support the EkoSkola committee's initiatives and implement the necessary changes.

However, despite these negative thoughts, Marisa mentioned another interesting initiative that Kemmuna Middle School adopted to boost interest in EkoSkola projects was the introduction of school competitions:

Normally, when you make a competition between classes, for example, trying to find which class generates less waste. Instead of giving a negative image of those classes that generate a lot of waste, rather than blaming them, make a positive initiative. It is like a game. If you are doing well, you will get a reward.... I see this as something very effective, as it is introduced healthily. You are not going to pinpoint negativity. You cannot believe how much it works.

(Marisa, EkoSkola teacher Kemmuna)

Sophie and Gemma shared their views about the two competitions they organized at their school. They agreed with Marisa since such competition increased interest in recycling and in understanding the importance of reusing material (which is one of the main action plans for their school).

Sophie: Once, we had a competition where we had to decorate the classrooms for Christmas using recycled materials like toilet paper rolls. The students were more interested in following us than in other projects since we showed them how these toilet paper rolls were used.

Gemma: We had another competition where they had to create a carnival costume using recycled materials. Many were interested and wanted to compete. So when you have competitions, you are delivering your message differently; instead of explaining during an assembly, you simply create a competition, and many would learn from the experience.

(Committee Kemmuna)

It is interesting how the Kemmuna Middle School committee considered innovative ways to increase interest in SD through competitions. Although assemblies seem very effective, they did not want their peers to become accustomed to them, which would make them less effective over time.

Amber and Mona also showed how their committee found a solution to excessive waste generation at their school by introducing an incentive that not only promoted container reuse but also launched a loyalty scheme that rewarded the most responsible.

Amber: Whenever you go to buy something from the tuck shop, the first time they give you a loyalty card, and every time you use a reusable cup or container, the card is rubber-stamped, and when you collect a certain number of rubber stamps, you get vouchers that can be used in the tuck shop. This way, we promoted the use of reusable cups and containers.

Mona: So instead of always receiving a bag or other plastic containers when buying food and drinks, you will have these containers. You will have something reusable to reduce the waste.

Me: And who came up with this idea of the loyalty card?

Mona: We discussed it as a committee, tried to determine what we needed to do, and concluded that a loyalty card was needed.

(Committee Filfla)

This EkoSkola project not only helped keep the school environment cleaner, but also helped all the students realise that they can contribute to less plastic consumption. The loyalty card incentive encouraged students to be more sustainable and rewarded them for using reusable plastics.

All the link teachers spoke about the importance of the committee in shifting initiatives from a committee level to a WSA. Lyndsey explained that at some point, the students should stop saying this is an EkoSkola committee's initiative and instead recognize it as a whole-school

initiative. Roberta reminded us that the harvesting of olives was initially an EkoSkola committee's initiative, but today, it is one of the main school activities organized in October:

The olives were harvested by the committee members during the fifteen-minute break. They liked it and asked me; Can we ask the whole school to start harvesting the olives? This will be one of next year's activities where all the school will have the chance to harvest the olives with their class teacher, and it is logged on the school calendar. So, yes, the committee was successful here.

(Roberta, Link teacher Gaudos)

The fact that 90 students out of a population of 473 serve on different EkoSkola sub-committees at Gaudos Secondary School shows that EkoSkola has a very strong influence on the school community.

Yes, I think that EkoSkola is the largest group we have at our school. Many students and teachers and students give us a lot of support even students who are not in EkoSkola give us a lot of importance. They say the committee is organizing an activity, and we need to respect them. So, from that aspect, we do not find any difficulties as activities become whole school initiatives.

(Federica, Committee Gaudos)

The fact that, in some schools, other committees adopt sustainable practices without the EkoSkola committee's intervention demonstrates that EkoSkola practices are widely adopted as a WSA.

Some decisions are taken keeping EkoSkola in mind. Outside, we didn't have bins, and now we have them. We had the Christmas market, and children brought with them reusable cups. There was the Valentine's Day activity, and the organizers asked all the children to get reusable cups, so to an extent, yes, when activities are organized, the work done by the EkoSkola is infiltrated into other activities that are not organized by the committee. They are organised by other committees, for example, those of hospitality, etc, and the initiatives of EkoSkola became a whole school approach.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

However, according to Marisa, to become a WSA, it must be part of the SDP. This ensures that all teaching staff and other educators incorporate ESD into all their subjects.

That is why a proposal will be done through SDP. We always say that ESD needs to enter the school SDP. That is the target. To make things work correctly and as they should be. There, you will have the right whole-school approach. That is the ideal. There are a lot of schools like that. (Marisa EkoSkola teacher Kemmuna)

It was not clear how the participating teachers felt about integrating ESD into their subjects. It was also unclear how comfortable they were with changing their pedagogy and whether they

had sufficient time for hands-on activities and discussions. Shallcross (2007) affirms that WSA attempts to assimilate all the aspects of education by bridging formal education with non-formal education (such as lifelong learning and community outreach) and informal education, which focuses on what happens in community life that is influential to learning. In their study, which was conducted in Yokahoma in 22 schools, from the questionnaires answered by teachers, Sasaki, Yonehara, and Kitamura (2023) revealed that with whole school approaches, teachers who were interested in ESD programs felt a sense of ownership and were less stressed when implementing changes to their teaching methods in promoting SD. Additionally, a WSA enhances collaboration and mutual support among teachers, students, and parents, both within and outside the school. This is very similar to what I have observed at Kemmuna Middle School and Gaudos Secondary School, as evidenced below.

4.6.4 Promoting SD practices to the parents and local communities

Fielding (2004), Mitra (2008), and Ruddock and McIntyre (2007) have all discussed the importance of giving children sufficient space and opportunities to express themselves to parents and within the community. Likewise, Chris emphasized that this should not be done only at the school level, but also at the local and national levels. According to him, if ESD projects are not promoted to parents and local communities, they may find little support and become more difficult to implement outside the school's parameters. For Chris, it is not enough to promote ESD projects at the school level if parents and the local community are not informed about the initiatives. The support adults can provide for student-led projects can increase their longevity and yield better outcomes. Chris added that public relations (PR) is a means to educate parents, and the general public is in line with what Ruddock (1996; 1998) and Ruddock and McIntyre (2007) are saying:

Our school does a lot of PR. We use social media to promote the work. We have a lot of parents following, and we also use the website. In the first meetings, I always emphasize a lot with the parents the importance of our website and social media because those are their first points of reference. We advertise everything we do. We have a section on our school website, and every activity related to EkoSkola is found in this section and linked to social media.

(Chris Head Filfla)

Khloe and Gemma spoke about an opportunity their own video, posted on the school's social media, gave them, as they were then invited to share their EkoSkola project on a local TV station.

Khloe: For example, we did a video and posted it on Facebook. So, when people watch this video, they can see that this school is doing something. Obviously, we did not do a lot, but for example, we also post photos of us working.

Me: And you had a lot of views and likes?

Gemma: Yes, and we went on television

Me: And what did you do?

Gemma: We spoke about wrapping paper, what is recyclable, and what is not. We also spoke about where the idea of the video came from and we explained what we did.

(Committee Kemmuna)

This video gave the Kemmuna committee many opportunities, as it helped them convey their message on waste management to the school community and local communities, and at the same time empowered them to share their ideas on sustainability on a much larger scale: on the local TV station.

According to Carmen, using social media, such as Facebook pages and websites, can also help committees connect with parents and local communities.

I think that they need to learn how to attract people and get the attention of others. This is seen in every aspect when someone can see things, they can appreciate the work done. Because there is a change. And you are constantly seeing it. They are seeing a changing environment. It is becoming better.

(Carmen, Head Kemmuna)

Khloe emphasised that social media can demonstrate how the committee is functioning, and such promotion is also another way of expressing themselves to the community.

For example, we did a video and posted it on Facebook so people could see what the school is doing. We also posted some photos of us working on different projects.

(Khloe, Committee Kemmuna)

From her experience, Doris acknowledged that children have a significant influence on their parents, and through EkoSkola initiatives, children learn how to educate their parents and raise awareness of environmental sustainability.

Those children who experience EkoSkola undoubtedly affect their parents because they go home and tell their parents about what they are doing. The feedback received from the parents is very positive, and they are also creating awareness, etc.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Cincera and Krajhanzi (2013) accentuated the importance of community links with schools, and successful green flag schools need to share their experiences with the community to replicate behaviours that promote sustainability. This is what the participant schools seem to be doing: using the school's social media, they share and promote sustainable practices with everyone.

Despite limited time to work on projects involving the local community, members of the EkoSkola committee at Melita promoted a cleaner environment and advocated for less destruction of the natural environment for construction.

Kim: Maybe we will not have much plastic on the pavement.

Ella: Maybe they will not cut trees, and when they build houses and apartments, they will not use the countryside, but instead they should use abundant houses.

Noella: If we take, for example, what happened in Mosta [a city in Malta], where they tried to cut trees, think about those people who stayed there [the protesters] left a great impact and took the right decision. Few people can do this, even though we could have, I think.

(Committee Melita)

What Kim, Ella, and Noella are discussing here shows that by working on projects beyond a school level, they learnt and realised the major issues in their localities and nationwide, thus enabling them to develop the strategies and skills to address them.

Apart from using social media, the Melita Secondary School committee also found that the prize-giving ceremonies were a good opportunity to promote projects and to voice their concerns to parents and local communities.

They create very interesting presentations for the school concerts when the hall is filled with people. So we do not only give them opportunities to voice themselves during the assemblies, but also when we have internal and external activities

(Katie, Head Melita)

Although such practices seem effective, one should keep in mind that during these events, only the parents of prize winners are present, while the parents of other students may not have received the message.

Other initiatives mentioned by the four committees during the focus groups included participation in the Young People's Summit, the Ekoparliament, YRE, and the Litterless campaign, sharing video clips with informational material on social media, and participating in local radio and TV programs.

So, they were very effective. They brought change. The video was successful; they won with it. They managed to incorporate the YRE and Litterless campaign in their EkoSkola project. If I am not mistaken, they won the national award with their video.

(Marisa, EkoSkola Teacher Kemmuna)

These initiatives gave children the chance to focus more on how to promote effectively because they not only wanted to deliver a strong message in support of SD to the public but also had the opportunity to compete with other EkoSkola committees.

Three out of four participant committees admitted that one of the biggest difficulties they faced was not reaching the local communities effectively. The committees mentioned two main reasons: the EkoSkola committees do not have enough time to coordinate projects with the local councils, and not all the local councils prioritize EkoSkola projects.

The committee expressed concern that, despite the local council offering its support, it is not readily available in practice. The impression is that the support is very cosmetic, that is, rather than just receiving praise for their achievements, the committees would have preferred to receive from the local councils the support, resources, and opportunities to bring the needed changes within the localities.

Elaine: The local council gives us support, even though not as much as we want. For example, last year they recognized our effort to win the Green Flag. The mayor came to school, and we had an assembly, and he gave us a memento. However, when we asked him for help, it still had not arrived. Like posters, for example.

Fiona: The will is there, but I think they have a lot of things to do. There are priorities. The desire to help us is there, but when it comes to fact... Sometimes we send him an email, but he does not reply. We either need to see the most effective way to communicate with him, or else they have other things to do.

Josette: Last year, we had a clean-up date in the locality. We asked for the garbage bags, but he didn't reply.

Fiona: And then he was so happy when he saw us!

Josette: Yes, he was, and he also thanked us. Then, we did another clean-up day in another locality, and they immediately provided us with all the needed resources.

(Link teachers, Melita)

Francesca showed a great desire to work more with the local communities and other schools in Malta and internationally.

I wish we were more involved with the local councils so we could work on more projects outside the school. We can also work with other schools. Last year, when we had our audit, she told us [link teacher] that there were other schools that wanted to do eTwinning. Two schools working together. At the end of the year [scholastic year], we discussed starting eTwinning the year after. This year, we need to find a school with which we will do eTwinning and decide what we will do. This takes a long time until you start communicating with the school and begin the project.

(Francesca, Committee Gaudos)

Francesca's statement resonates with the findings of Bennel (2015) and Rauch (2016) on the advantages of school-to-school networking. In fact, when I asked why this was important to them, Francesca highlighted the aims of promoting sustainability and sharing best practices.

Because you spread the word with the students, not all the schools work on the same thing. You take ideas from others; what we discuss here is discussed in other schools. There are always different opinions and perspectives, and if you solve a problem, you are also solving another school's problem. So there is more support from other schools to find a solution to a problem.

(Committee Gaudos)

Federica continued by sharing her experience of the committee's visit to Amsterdam and the presentation of their projects.

Last year, we went to Amsterdam. We met other schools from different countries. We were a four-member committee. We had the opportunity to view other schools' projects and presented our project: waste separation and food waste prevention, which involved olive picking. We picked olives to help the nuns by producing oil. We had the opportunity to do a presentation to other schools. In fact, we were voted, I think, first or second. In fact, we were the only students participating because the other schools were represented by their educators. We had the opportunity to share ideas, discuss them, and find ways how we could work together. It was a very nice experience.

(Federica, Committee Gaudos)

From this experience, Federica and the other committee members had the opportunity to reflect on their work, share their experiences and perspectives, and learn from the ideas and initiatives of the other schools. This is strongly promoted and encouraged by UNESCO's ESD: A roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO (2020) emphasizes the importance of sharing best practices between schools at the national and international levels, as certain environmental and social issues are similar across schools (despite their geographic locations).

Chris affirmed that their EkoSkola committee has a strong community outreach program. This might be because the catchment area of this school includes only two localities, compared to the other three schools, which serve areas across Malta (church schools) or, in the case of Kemmuna Middle School, eight catchment areas. Another reason is that students at Filfla Secondary School enrolled in the CCP (Core Competence Program) participate in several community projects.

Yes, our school has a strong community outreach. Due to the various initiatives organized by the school, the EkoSkola committee, as well as on individual levels, such as the teachers teaching CCP classes, are involved in several community projects... This year, we started to work with the local council, and thanks to the initiative Walk the Mile, we gave the council several trees as a donation. These will be planted in the local community. Together with the committee will continue the discussions regarding the bikes so that the students residing in this locality can come to school using their bikes.

(Chris, Head Filfla)

Aguilar (2016) emphasises that community projects, similar to those of Filfla Secondary School, enhance community knowledge and understanding of SD initiatives, raise awareness of local and national environmental issues, promote community involvement, and make decision-making a lifelong learning process.

According to Jake, another effective way the school can promote EkoSkola's initiatives is by flying the green flag in a visible location. When he was asked why this was important, he replied:

Yes, people would know that the school is delivering a message. It will not make that much difference because, obviously, you cannot force people to do something. However, if you fly the Green flag at the main entrance, people would know that the school is working in favour of sustainability.

(Jake, Committee Kemmuna)

For Jake, the green flag is a significant symbol that reminds people that sustainability is not optional but necessary to ensure a better future. In line with Jake, Cincera and Krajhanzi (2013) and Spinola (2015) explain that by flying the green flag, you are not only showing the local community that the school supports SD, but it also serves as a reminder to the school community that their actions and behaviours need to align with the committee's EkoSkola action plans.

Stephania explained that the Melita Secondary School committee also attempted to garner support from an ex-student who is a Maltese social media influencer promoting thrift shops. They wanted to share their ideas for reusing objects to reduce waste. Initially, their initiative was not well received by the school community, so they asked her for support.

They reached her and asked her to come again to school to explain to them what they were doing wrong. They told her that their friends were making fun of them rather than supporting them, and the influencer accepted their invitation. They went to the source because she has more than 16K followers, and thrifting is her way of life. So, they wanted to share a success story and adapt it to their school situation.

(Stephania, EkoSkola teacher Melita)

According to Stephania, the influencer advised on making the project successful, increasing students' visibility on social media, and promoting the school's thrift shops within the local community. This experience seemed to help the committee learn effective strategies for reaching the school and local community through social media.

4.6.5 Promotion of hands-on activities and entrepreneurship as part of EkoSkola projects

Doris explained that one reason EkoSkola projects became more popular and more students began participating was the many hands-on activities, with students actively involved even during lessons.

Here we have the science lessons and EkoSkola sessions that are working together. So automatically, the younger students, while learning science in Year 7 and Year 8, are getting more interested. For them, the science lessons were enjoyable. They are longing for hands-on learning, and when you say hands-on learning is not by

words but, literally, hands-on learning where they get dirty with mud, they go out in the greenery area and work with the soil... So even those kids who are reserved and do not form part of the committee, they try to involve themselves, and they change, as they are taking a unique experience that is not that common.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Gaudos Secondary School and Melita Secondary School focused on two projects that involved numerous hands-on activities and also introduced entrepreneurship. The Gaudos Secondary School committee said that when they harvested vegetables, all the produce was sold to teachers and staff. All the earned money was then used to purchase new equipment and seeds. During the entire process, children learned how to save money, economize when purchasing new items, promote their products, and conduct research to reduce waste and increase production without using harmful pesticides or chemicals on food.

The money raised when selling vegetables, etc, will be taken by the committee because the school does not make any profit. We are not doing it for profit but to educate children. So, they are learning from an economic aspect, entrepreneurship, and the financial side of things, which in reality is part of education for sustainable development. Here, you have a lot of cross-curricular links.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

During olive harvesting, students had the chance to learn how to preserve olives, make olive oil, and help the religious sisters. Knowing they could actively participate in this project, students felt more motivated to attend school and enjoyed their time doing something they liked.

Our nuns are old, but before, they used to harvest olives. Instead of paying someone to do the job, this job is done by the students and their teachers during their science lessons. So, they are harvesting olives, they are learning the whole process, and they enjoy it. At times, we come out as well and work with them. So, the fact that they are seeing us working with them creates a sense of community, and there is a meaning to what is done.

(Doris, Head Gaudos)

Christensen, Knezek, and Tyler-Wood (2015) view hands-on activities as opportunities for students to gain a deep understanding of all the processes and, at the same time, increase long-term knowledge retention. In addition, the authors argue that when students feel the activities are relevant to them and provide more opportunities to explore and develop who they aspire to be, they are more stimulated and produce better outcomes. This is similar to what Doris emphasized about the opportunities created for her students when they started harvesting olives at the school.

4.6.6 Promoting social inclusion

Although, as shown earlier, the committees tried to work on projects that yielded visible results, such as cleaner environments or greener areas, social inclusion was also at the heart of most projects and in the way the committees worked. When asked whether the committee represents all students, including those with disabilities, the participants replied positively.

Yes, it does, even for those who have some academic difficulties. There are those with low self-esteem or who are too shy to read in front of others and have dyslexia; we give them more opportunities to read and adapt their speeches according to their needs so that they can read better. We give them a chance to rehearse. We have a good number of these students.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Roberta explained how a sign language course offered to the students was part of the school's EkoSkola project. This course was intended to help students find ways to include a student with a hearing impairment in their school community.

Roberta: Last year, every Friday, we had a course in sign language, which was part of EkoSkola. For students in EkoSkola, there is a group that has learnt this language to communicate with those with special needs. We are seeing its importance in creating inclusion at our school and beyond.

(Roberta, Committee Gaudos)

Of the four participant committees, this was the only one with a project specifically related to supporting disabled people and demonstrating awareness of the importance of caring for them to ensure social inclusion.

However, during the interviews and focus groups, it was observed that the committees were eager to encourage disabled students to join and participate in all activities.

But in our school, I can tell you, because I have seen it myself, students with autism or intellectual disabilities come and participate with us, and they enjoy it. I think that in EkoSkola, there is full support to ensure that these things happen.

(Ann, EkoSkola teacher Gaudos)

Additionally, Katie recognized the importance of having committee members with a statement of needs. This helps them gain confidence and learn to voice their concerns despite their difficulties.

When it comes to inclusion, we have students who sit on the committee who have a statement of needs and have certain personal needs. So, we are giving them some importance within the committee, and we are giving them more empowerment, so at a certain point, EkoSkola is reaching all aspects of inclusion because it includes all the students.

(Katie, Head Melita)

Ann acknowledged that, in the past, one of the action plans the EkoSkola committee at Gaudos Secondary School worked on was how to include students with hearing impairments within their school community.

There was a time when the committee had an action plan on how to support students with hearing impairment. They were really strong on this. They had an action plan around three years ago. They had a very good impact on how the school community views EkoSkola. For me, this is a very important factor.

(Ann, EkoSkola teacher Gaudos)

Ann acknowledges that the role of the link teacher is crucial in determining the extent to which committees prioritize social inclusion. When given the opportunity, children have a lot to say about inclusion, and at the same time, the topics that the link teachers, at times, choose for students significantly influence the subjects students explore.

It depends a lot on the direction given by the link person. If the link person is comfortable with it, the committee will follow that line. However, I can tell you that yesterday we had the summit, and in this summit, we discussed children's policy. Most of this policy is on well-being, so it is purely social. I wish that you had been there, listening to the children discussing the ideas that came to them. They are also capable of discussing on that level as well as the social aspects. Thus, EkoSkola is not only the environment, but it could be that the link teacher, as well as we, the coordinators, might give that direction.

(Ann, EkoSkola teacher Gaudos)

Rebecca shared her experience with Liam's empowerment; he is a committee member with a condition and stutters when he talks.

[Liam], who has speech difficulty, was the only one who volunteered to talk because the others were too shy to talk during the assembly. It is a challenge to talk in front of people, and public speaking is not something that you can just do. He has a lot of difficulty talking, and when he asked me to talk, it was the first time, and I was very surprised.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

However, she was even more surprised when one of her colleagues, a teacher, asked her why she had chosen him to give a speech in front of so many people on prize day. She was very confused and shocked to receive such feedback from her colleague.

We had the rehearsals, and I asked Liam to go on the podium so that he would get the feel and he could start experiencing the audience and the lights so that when he goes there, he would not feel overwhelmed. He did the rehearsals, and one of the teachers came to me after the rehearsals. He told me you chose this student to make a statement, or you want him to talk. I didn't know how to reply; I was not happy. He told me that in the audience, you will have people laughing at him and making fun of him. I could not believe it, a teacher was saying this, and I replied:

So not even you want me to give him an opportunity? It seems that he wanted me to choose someone else. I felt the resistance, unfortunately, even from the adults.

(Rebecca, Link teacher Filfla)

Rebecca has shown that, despite educators having a 'duty' to promote inclusion, it is concerning that some teachers still doubt it and question the involvement of disabled children. As the UN DESD (UNESCO, 2014) emphasizes, EkoSkola projects need to promote inclusion by providing opportunities for students of all ages to celebrate diversity. The fact that all four participating committees had one or more students with a disability or condition showed that the committees were also representing those who are normally marginalized or considered vulnerable. Interestingly, none of the committees had students who were not Maltese, and consequently, in all four participating schools, students who were not Maltese were not represented by the EkoSkola committees. This has been discussed earlier (in Theme 1); however, if children from diverse cultural backgrounds are not represented, they will find it more challenging to express themselves, and, as a result, achieving social inclusion becomes more difficult for them.

4.6.7 Summary of findings

According to the participants, a successful promotion of the programs and outreach to the local communities can be done by:

- i) Giving opportunities to students to do research.
- ii) Using social media and MS Teams to reach the school community, parents, and the local community.
- iii) Producing informative videos that schools and local communities could watch.
- iv) Promoting a whole school approach in all ESD projects
- v) Encouraging hands-on activities and intrapreneurship to increase interest and motivation.
- vi) Advocating for social inclusion.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research findings, which were analyzed and discussed using academic literature from both local and international sources. Most of the research findings confirmed the results of studies conducted in Malta and internationally, showing that, despite differences in geographical location, culture, and students' specific needs, EkoSkola committees in Malta and internationally share similar goals. They also face similar barriers, including time constraints and a lack of support. Additionally, it was clear that committee members share similar personal characteristics that help them promote and encourage pro-SD initiatives at their schools and local communities.

The main findings of this research indicated that distributed leadership is the preferred style that encourages student leadership in implementing ESD projects across the four participating schools. HOSs who demonstrated an interest in sustainability and in the students' proposals helped the committees build confidence and gain greater support from the school community. The findings also clearly show that, in all four participating schools, committees were consulted when decisions were made; however, all final decisions were made by the HOSs and their SLTs. Nonetheless, it was also evident that in some instances, the HOSs also consulted the EkoSkola committees and sought their opinions before making decisions.

Regarding the personal qualities and attributes of EkoSkola committee members, this research has identified 15 common traits. These were identified through interviews and focus groups with educators and EkoSkola committees. These qualities helped them motivate peers to become aware of social and environmental issues, participate in EkoSkola initiatives, and carry out school-based projects and local projects (when supported by local councils). Additionally, to overcome barriers during project implementation, committee members demonstrated strong perseverance and self-motivation. This was closely linked to their love for the natural environment and their eagerness to reflect and find solutions to the issues hindering SD.

This chapter also identified several challenges faced by the four participant EkoSkola committees. Most of these challenges are similar to those reported in international and local research studies, including time constraints, funding issues, and a lack of support from staff and peers. However, additional challenges include the lack of recognition for the work of EkoSkola committees within the Maltese education system, the absence of policies that support ESD, and the fact that students in Maltese state middle schools spend only 2 years there. This makes it difficult for the EkoSkola committees to develop long-term strategies and solutions for their schools' social and environmental issues.

This research also revealed several strategies used by the four EkoSkola committee participants to promote their initiatives and projects. The most effective strategies included adopting a whole-school approach when implementing initiatives, using social media, promoting hands-on activities and entrepreneurship, and conducting research to identify the needs and interests of their school and local communities.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, reviews the three research questions and relates key findings for each. It will also present how these findings have contributed to the generation of knowledge and make a number of recommendations to policymakers, HOSs, local councils, and all those involved in supporting the EkoSkola committees.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This study aimed to determine the level of participation in decision-making (using Mitra's theory of students' voice and participation) reached by the four participating EkoSkola committees. It also sought to determine the extent to which the strategies adopted by the committees during the implementation of the EkoSkola projects have empowered students' voices. In addition, I also tried to identify which leadership styles adopted by the participant heads of school have empowered students' voices and encouraged students' leadership. From the research findings, gathered through interviews and focus groups, I also identified a number of personal qualities and attributes that EkoSkola committee members share, and how these qualities help them implement initiatives and projects in the most effective ways. This chapter will revisit the three research questions and briefly discuss how they were answered using the research findings.

This chapter will also present four research limitations to be considered in future research on this topic. After highlighting the limitations, I discussed how this research has generated new knowledge about EkoSkola. This part is important because the reader can understand which findings confirm the research results of international and national studies on eco-schools and EkoSkola, which findings are unique, and finally determine how all the findings contributed to the generation of new knowledge.

At the end of the chapter, seven recommendations will be made to policy makers, educators (including HOSs and SLT members), local councils, NGOs, and politicians. These recommendations are intended to encourage all those who support students in implementing the EkoSkola programs to seek appropriate strategies that promote students' participation in decision-making and give students' voices greater space to contribute to better school environments. All stakeholders need to give committee members more opportunities to work with local councils and to decide which strategies could be more effective in solving environmental and social issues within local communities.

5.2.1 Key empirical findings

This research study attempted to answer three research questions:

RQ1:

To what extent were students' voices within EkoSkola committees being heard and given due importance?

RQ2:

How effective and successful were strategies to empower student voices adopted by EkoSkola committees in implementing EkoSkola programs?

RQ3:

Which leadership styles adopted by heads of schools (HOSs) empowered student voices and encouraged student leadership?

The next three subsections summarize the research findings that helped me answer the three research questions. Data from eleven interviews and five focus groups not only improved my understanding of how the EkoSkola committees operated and their efforts to promote more sustainable practices at their schools, but also enabled me to address the three RQs. Although, as previously mentioned, the findings are not representative of all EkoSkola committees in Malta, they provide insights into the experiences of four committees and the educators working with them (link teachers, EkoSkola teachers, and heads of schools). These findings highlight the personal qualities committee members possessed or developed during the implementation of initiatives, the strategies they used to carry them out, and the leadership styles that encouraged members to speak up and participate in decision-making.

5.2.2 Research question 1

To what extent are students' voices within EkoSkola committees being heard and given due importance?

According to this study's findings, all the committees struggled in different ways to reach level 2 of Mitra's (2008) model of student voice and participation. However, when the committees were involved in SD-related issues, they received greater support from the SLT and educators (especially the Gaudos committee), and there was more dialogue with them. At Kemmuna Middle School and Filfla Secondary School, students identified issues related to waste management (Christmas wrapping paper waste awareness and the tuck shop token, respectively) and started the program by encouraging a whole-school approach. Although not all educators and peers collaborated during the EkoSkola committees' implementation of their initiatives, the committees still achieved the necessary changes and raised significant awareness of waste management in their schools. It was also very clear that the decisions were made by their respective HOSs and SLTs. Melita Secondary School and Gaudos Secondary School appeared to have enjoyed more support from their educators and peers. Although at Melita school the committee was consulted by the HOS and the nuns (who run the school), it seemed that the themes on which the committee worked were heavily influenced by the link teachers. The Gaudos Secondary School committee demonstrated that they not only collaborated with teachers and peers to identify issues and initiate reforms, but also, in many cases, led subcommittees and influenced important decisions related to the school's environmental issues made by their HOS and SLT. Although the EkoSkola committee at Gaudos Secondary School seemed to have reached level 2 of Mitra's (2008) three-tiered

model, they were progressing well toward level 3, as support from educators and SLT was high and many students were involved in EkoSkola. However, it is worth noting that, despite the HOS's high regard for the EkoSkola committee members, all final decisions regarding the school environment were made by the HOS. Nonetheless, the committee was working hard to gain opportunities for active leadership roles to make decisions alongside the HOS and SLT.

The findings of this research showed that several personal characteristics and qualities are common among the committee members. Still, some of these qualities help specific members perform their tasks more effectively and succeed in public speaking and in leading their peers. The four main qualities that the EkoSkola committee members possessed or developed during project implementation were: the ability to work in a team, high self-motivation and perseverance, and the ability to learn from change.

Based on interviews and focus groups, it is clear that successful committees are composed of students who genuinely care about and love protecting their natural environment. This trait was common across all the participating committees. All the children involved displayed a strong interest in nature and wildlife conservation, which was a primary reason they wanted to join their school's EkoSkola committee (since meetings were held during breaks).

Despite encountering numerous barriers and challenges—such as limited time for research and projects, insufficient support from some educators and peers, and fear of change—committee members demonstrated strong self-motivation and perseverance. This enabled them not only to collaborate with their peers and voice their opinions to their educators but also to take advantage of opportunities to speak at school events like Prize Days, represent the school at local summits and forums, and share best practices with other schools.

According to the research participants, all of this was a result of empowerment, because at first, not all committee members felt confident speaking in front of an audience, sharing their thoughts and concerns with a group, or discussing issues that affected them and their peers with their head of school. These findings show that, across the four participating schools, EkoSkola gave children the chance to learn to communicate more effectively and to express their messages. Committee members also realized that, if they had limited opportunities to speak with their HOSs about their projects, intentions, concerns, or requests, they needed to prepare thoroughly and research before meetings. Students stated that by being persuasive and clearly sharing their successes, they increased their chances of gaining their HOSs' support and approval. Moreover, according to committee members, when they succeeded in convincing school staff to support them and in effectively communicating their message, the likelihood of successfully implementing a project was higher. Although it was noted that the Gaudos Secondary School committee had the most peer support, the other three committees managed to carry out their projects as part of a whole school approach, despite all challenges.

Another crucial skill that the participant committee members mastered well was time management. All the research participants stated that there was a limited amount of time available to carry out their projects. Despite meeting during short school breaks, they still managed to make meaningful changes to their schools. They used promotions to motivate

their peers and teachers to adopt healthier lifestyles and attitudes, thereby supporting sustainable development.

Although the four participant committees showed different ways of managing their time and focusing on the most essential themes when implementing the EkoSkola program, the Gaudos Secondary School committee demonstrated how they even worked after school hours without being asked by their link teachers or other educators to complete all the tasks they had set. The fact that all four committees had subcommittees working on different areas helped them manage their time more effectively and achieve all the planned outcomes and action plans.

Another important quality that all the participant committees demonstrated was their willingness to listen and adapt. They listened to their peers, educators, parents, and other individuals they worked with, and they sought solutions to their requests and suggestions. According to the research participants, when committees listened to one another and to all stakeholders, they could identify issues and share solutions more effectively to resolve them. The four committees showed how they provided everyone, including peers with individual educational needs, the opportunity to promote inclusion. The EkoSkola teachers demonstrated that this skill is mastered when children learn to be reflective and evaluative while implementing their programs. Despite their young age, it was evident that all the committee members could assess and reflect on their work. They could distinguish between successful and less successful strategies and adapt accordingly. The research data also revealed that the participant committee members were very good at self-evaluation because they could critically assess their practices and identify areas for improvement or change. This ability to reflect and adapt helped them resolve issues more effectively and manage their limited time more efficiently.

Summary of findings in relation to RQ 1:

In line with Mitra's theory of students' voice and participation, all participating EkoSkola committees have reached level 2, or are close to reaching it, when implementing ESD projects. However, when schools faced issues unrelated to the school environment, the EkoSkola committees were rarely consulted, or, if they were, only after the SLT had made a decision. Gaudos Secondary School is working toward reaching level 3, especially if the HOS and SLT continue to recognize the efforts and provide opportunities for the committee to participate in decision-making on issues related to the school environment and social problems at school. The research also indicates that the personal qualities and attributes of EkoSkola committee members enhance students' leadership skills.

The committee members have discussed the importance and benefits of working in a team. The main qualities and attributes of EkoSkola committee members, as identified in the findings, were being good listeners, possessing strong leadership skills, collaborating effectively with others, and managing time efficiently. Self-motivation, high motivation, persistence, perseverance, enthusiasm, competitiveness, problem-solving skills, and the ability to speak in public were also very common among the four participant EkoSkola committee members.

Another important characteristic shared by most of the participant committee members was the ability to learn from changes. The key qualities and attributes identified in the findings included the ability to evaluate and reflect, to think critically and creatively, and to use technology effectively to address issues or initiate new projects.

5.2.3 Research question 2

How effective and successful are strategies to empower student voices adopted by EkoSkola committees in implementing EkoSkola programs?

The four participating committees adopted different strategies to provide students with opportunities to have their voices heard and participate in decision-making while carrying out their projects. Some strategies adopted by the participating committees were common across different scenarios and worked well. The committee's commitment to promoting a whole-school approach was vital in changing the initial view that the projects belonged solely to the EkoSkola committees. This change helped students see that the projects were school-wide initiatives, making all students feel included during the process. If only committee members, without peers and educators, had implemented the projects, success would have been unlikely, as seen in findings from Kemmuna Middle School and Filfla Secondary School. Many students hesitated to contribute to or support the committees despite efforts to show that the changes could benefit the entire school community. I noticed a significant difference in how popular the committees were: at Gaudos Secondary School, about one-fifth of students were actively involved in EkoSkola projects, while fewer students participated in sub-committees at Filfla Secondary School and Kemmuna Middle School. As a result, committees at Filfla Secondary School and Kemmuna Middle School faced greater resistance and challenges from peers and staff when launching their projects than those at Melita Secondary School and Gaudos Secondary School. This shows the importance of doing research before designing and starting a new project.

During the school environmental audit, students identified the main themes that the program needed to address. However, that alone was not enough. The committees also used several questionnaires and surveys to understand their peers' and teachers' concerns about the school environment. This helped the committees identify the main issues requiring urgent action and understand how the school community was responding to these problems. This understanding was key in making effective changes, as the committees knew that proposing strategies was more successful when the school community understood that those strategies aimed to make necessary improvements. The four committees also conducted research on environmental issues and examined best practices from other local and international schools. While learning from other committees' initiatives, the participating committees tried new strategies and adapted them to their schools' specific needs.

Parental involvement was also a very successful strategy adopted by all the participating committees. The committees realized that parents' role was crucial in bringing about changes in attitudes and behaviours. Promoting good practices at a school level was not enough since changes also needed to be made at home. This was a very challenging task because the proposed changes affected people's lifestyles, and changing lifestyles in a highly consumeristic

world is not easy without appropriate strategies. This is why the committees not only highlighted the most unsustainable practices but also tried to share and encourage practices that were not time-consuming and could be easily implemented without incurring significant costs.

All four participating committees found the strategies involving local councils to be ineffective. Although the committees noted some sporadic instances of collaboration with local councils, they found it very difficult to engage with them and secure their support. The reasons for their challenges ranged from a lack of time to meet with the mayors to the local councils' lack of interest and enthusiasm for the projects.

Another effective strategy was encouraging students to participate in hands-on activities. These activities ranged from planting vegetables and herbs to harvesting olives. When teachers began promoting outdoor learning, many students enjoyed it and became more enthusiastic about attending school and participating in projects. Although teachers had to modify their teaching methods, this encouraged greater student involvement. During the interviews, it was clear that students and educators attribute EkoSkola to protecting the natural environment and finding solutions to climate change. The committees also recognized that they lacked sufficient time to focus on social aspects of their communities and on issues related to inclusion. The potential implication of this finding is that, despite EkoSkola committees often demonstrating they had the ability and capacity to identify complex issues related to sustainable development and to find solutions to improve the situation, school leaders and policymakers still did not see the importance of encouraging students to participate in addressing social issues within the school community. Consequently, this could be seen as a missed opportunity to solve many social issues in schools that have remained unresolved over the years, despite numerous policies and regulations aimed at addressing these challenges.

Participating in national forums and debates to share best practices helped the committees build confidence and courage to speak up, even at the national level. This is a major achievement for the four committees, as they have learned to clearly express their concerns and ideas to address issues. As the students themselves said, speaking out at all levels (school, community, and national) showed they were working toward the common good, and their efforts supported a shared cause. They believe this encouraged more people to support and trust in their mission. Furthermore, networking with other schools was vital for the committees of Gaudos Secondary School and Melita Secondary School, as it gave them insight into how other committees resolved their issues and transformed their habits to effect necessary changes. This way, the participating committees felt more confident in seeking support from educators and the SLT. This was important because promoting their work, sustainable habits, and good practices could be difficult if educators did not understand or believe that such changes could lead to a better lifestyle.

Summary of key findings in relation to RQ 2

The four EkoSkola participant committees ensured that all projects promoted a whole-school approach. Additionally, the committees have recognized research as a vital factor for understanding how other committees or NGOs address environmental and social issues and for developing new strategies that meet the school community's needs. It is also essential for identifying immediate problems and requirements to be addressed in each school.

The findings also showed that parental involvement helps extend EkoSkola initiatives beyond the school and ensures lasting changes. This was also closely connected to sharing good practices with local communities and other EkoSkola committees, and, if the chance arises, to offering recommendations at the Ekoparliament.

Promoting hands-on activities where students can actively work on projects and enjoy outdoor experiences has also been very successful among the participating schools. Students also learned about intrapreneurship and managing funds, especially when resources were limited.

According to the participants, all these strategies were highly effective in ensuring the successful implementation of their EkoSkola initiatives. Although the way the committees implemented these strategies varied (from one committee to another), the findings showed that all the committees had used these strategies at some point.

5.2.4 Research question 3

Which leadership styles adopted by heads of schools empower student voices and encourage student leadership?

The research data collected from the four participating schools confirms the findings of previous local and international studies. The distributed leadership style seems to offer more opportunities for committees to organize and implement SD programs. The participating HOSs discussed the importance of adopting distributed leadership, which allows more space for children to work on projects and lead their peers in successfully achieving the set goals. However, despite all HOSs acknowledging that distributed leadership empowers children to make decisions and generate new ideas, it was clear that HOSs approve initiatives only after consulting their School Leadership Teams (SLTs), with the final decision resting with the HOSs. There were also instances where SLT members appeared to consult the committees after decisions had already been made. Therefore, in this case, the consultation was not part of the decision-making process but rather an opportunity to gather student feedback. Although the students seemed happy and privileged that their SLTs consulted them, they did not realize that their participation was not truly part of the decision-making process. This was especially evident in the two participating state schools (Kemmina Middle School and Filfla Secondary School). While at Gaudos, the committee appeared to have more opportunities to propose and present ideas for change, they still needed to obtain approval from their HOS.

Only the Gaudos EkoSkola committee consistently influenced its HOS's decisions in favour of sustainability. For example, they pushed for installing water fountains to reduce plastic bottle

use and creating a green space where students could grow and harvest crops during lessons. The other three committees' students tried to suggest and persuade their HOSs, but the final decision always rested with their respective HOSs. Hierarchical structures in schools were clear. All four HOSs emphasized that when children proposed a new project, the HOSs first considered the idea, then discussed it with their SLTs, and if the SLT approved, the project received the go-ahead. However, it was very clear that the ultimate decision was made during internal SLT discussions, not with the students. Regarding Melita's committee, it appears they operate independently; however, one link teacher was the assistant head. At one point, the assistant head stated that students chose themes and projects they wanted to work on. Yet, she later admitted that the committee sometimes needed guidance from adults to get started. This suggests that adults may have been guiding the committee to select certain themes that were more convenient for the link teachers—possibly due to time constraints and workload—rather than what students identified as the most effective for promoting behavioural and attitudinal change toward sustainability.

Another important finding is that when the HOSs showed the school community that they believed in the EkoSkola committees' work and praised their efforts to promote sustainability, the committees became more motivated and encouraged their peers to follow them. When the HOSs tried to allocate more time to listen to the committees and take their suggestions, the students became agents of change and owned the changes. This helped ensure initiatives were more successfully implemented and that implementation took a whole-school approach.

When the HOSs expressed interest in SD and understood the committees' role in driving change, many positive changes were observed, as noted by participating EkoSkola teachers. These positive changes were attributed to the HOSs' appreciation and encouragement toward their EkoSkola committees, especially when these committees faced barriers and struggles that could have easily demotivated them. The committees themselves highlighted that when they received encouragement, they believed more in their abilities and became better problem solvers and critical thinkers. These qualities helped EkoSkola committee members develop leadership skills while addressing major environmental issues at their schools.

The findings showed that the distributed leadership style adopted by the four participating HOSs helped the committee members, especially those from Gaudos Secondary School, lead their peers and share tasks, ensuring that all students interested in EkoSkola projects were involved and contributed to the project's success. It also helped them learn more about different ways to transfer pro-SD behaviours to their homes and local communities.

The EkoSkola committee at Gaudos highlighted the importance of having HOSs that encouraged them to consider new initiatives and projects, giving them the opportunity to lead. Despite the need for committees to meet and work during very short school breaks, the members successfully led sub-committees, each focusing on different initiatives to raise awareness, promote SD strategies, and educate the school community on how to reduce and avoid environmental issues. Although it appears that the other three participating EkoSkola committees have not yet reached the level of Mitra's theory of students' voice and participation achieved by Gaudos' committee, these three committees showed resilience and

worked diligently with their peers to increase awareness and create opportunities for their schools to become more sustainable. This is closely linked to the extent to which their HOSs believed in SD and the practices their school adopted.

Additionally, as noted by the EkoSkola teachers, when the HOSs adopted a distributed leadership style, even among educators, this ripple effect led educators to take on leadership roles in school initiatives. In turn, these educators encouraged students to lead their peers, ensuring the successful implementation of the EkoSkola program and other educational initiatives. This effect appeared to strengthen the bond among students, educators, and non-teaching staff.

Summary of key findings in relation to RQ 3

The leadership style most frequently mentioned for encouraging students to continue their projects and inspiring their peers to follow suit was distributed leadership. Participants reported that when their HOSs listened and allowed students to voice their ideas, the participant committees felt motivated, even when they felt insufficient support from peers, parents, or other educators. According to the participants, the distributed leadership style helped students gain confidence and motivation throughout the academic year and made them feel that, despite the lack of meetings with their HOSs, they still had their HOSs' support.

5.3 Research limitations

This study had a few limitations that are worth noting. Although these limitations may have directly or indirectly affected the findings, several measures were taken to minimize their impact whenever possible.

Limitation 1: Only four committees were observed and studied.

This study aimed to examine how four high-performing EkoSkola committees (considered as very active EkoSkola committees) across different Middle and Secondary Schools expressed themselves and participated in EkoSkola decision-making processes. Although these four groups do not represent all Maltese EkoSkola committees, they provided valuable insights into their operations, the barriers and challenges they faced in proposing and implementing new strategies for improvement, and how they engaged and motivated educators, parents, and the community to take necessary actions to change their behaviours and attitudes toward SD (Sustainable Development). Consequently, the study focused more on identifying the structures, practices, and conditions that supported student participation in decision-making and the successful implementation of the EkoSkola initiatives, rather than exploring contexts where student participation could have been more limited or inhibited.

As a result, the findings of this research may serve as strong examples of good practices in which students were given opportunities to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making processes. Therefore, barriers that are experienced by less established or less active EkoSkola committees may be more distinct than those identified in this study. Despite this, research was conducted in high-performing contexts; structural and institutional barriers were still identified,

showing how such barriers strongly influence the depth of student participation in decision-making processes.

It is highly recommended that future studies examine other committees and compare experiences. This study was not meant to find a common trend among all Maltese EkoSkola committees but instead focused on the experiences of committee members recognized (by a national coordinator) as skilled in implementing ESD programs at their schools through the EkoSkola projects.

Limitation 2: Time

The data were collected over a two-year period. One of the main challenges was finding suitable dates and times for interviews and focus groups. There were cases when the focus groups had to be postponed to a later date because students were involved in other school activities. Additionally, meetings with the link teachers occurred during their free time between lessons, in the hope that they would not need to take over a replacement lesson due to other teachers' absences.

Another challenge was the limited time available to meet the HOSs. Because of their busy schedules, organizing meetings was quite difficult, so I asked the four participant HOSs to suggest their preferred dates and times. I then adjusted my schedule to ensure I was available for the chosen appointments. This approach proved very effective, as all interviews were conducted as planned, with very few external distractions (such as students knocking on the door, educators waiting behind office doors, or telephone calls).

Limitation 3: Selection of participants

As explained in the methodology chapter, EkoSkola committees were selected based on recommendations from the national coordinator. The research participants came from two secondary girls' church schools, one secondary state school, and one middle state school. I had no representation from boys' secondary church schools or any independent schools. While it is helpful to have representation from all types of Maltese secondary schools, I initially aimed to understand the perspectives of students involved in EkoSkola committees that are very active in their schools and communities. The data collected provided a snapshot of the experiences at these four schools and showed how the committees voiced their opinions within their school communities, encouraging others to successfully implement projects that promote changes in behaviours and attitudes toward SD.

Limitation 4: Role of link teachers during the focus groups.

During the focus groups, the link teachers were also present. Although in most cases the students responded to my questions without hesitation, there were instances when the link teachers intervened by answering for the students or trying to help them recall what they had done in the past. Overall, I do not believe that the presence of the link teachers jeopardized the data collection; however, it is possible that the students were more cautious about discussing their HOSs and educators regarding their behaviours and attitudes toward SD. This

was more noticeable at Melita Secondary School, where one of the link teachers is an assistant head. When conducting research with minors, such limitations are common; however, during interviews and focus groups, I tried to reassure the students that what they said would remain confidential and could only be used to improve the implementation of EkoSkola programs.

5.4 Contribution to knowledge

This study aimed to understand the extent to which students' voices within EkoSkola committees were being heard. It was clear that all four participating schools were able to voice themselves with their HOSs (directly or indirectly), school communities, and parents when they spoke about sustainability issues and the importance of changing behaviours to improve the school, local, and home environments. However, various barriers hindered the success of creating awareness of environmental issues and promoting the projects. Despite the committees' efforts, there were many occasions when educators, parents, and peers did not understand the importance of changing their behaviours and attitudes to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. These barriers increased when the HOSs could not provide the needed support and time to encourage and promote the initiatives at the school level. Although the four participating committees acknowledged that their voices were given some importance by their school communities, the committees of the two church schools appeared to have received more support from their school communities. On the other hand, the two committees from state schools still managed to implement their projects, but they seemed to be involved in fewer initiatives and encountered more challenges and barriers along the way. This shows that despite ESD being mentioned and encouraged in the Maltese NCF (National Curriculum Framework) the EkoSkola teachers emphasised the need of a policy that guides educators on how they could support children in ESD programs, in teaching ESD as a cross-curricular subject, and in ensuring that students' voices are not only heard but given the importance, to ensure that children actively participate in decision making.

This study has clearly shown that, despite the participants' appreciation for the EkoSkola committees' hard work, commitment, perseverance, and ability to address issues, none of the four participating committees reached Level 3 of Mitra's theory of students' voices and participation in decision-making. This showed that on many occasions, while committee members felt empowered because they had the opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts about ESD projects and initiatives, and at times, even if they came up with the ideas of new initiatives or projects, ultimately, the HOSs and SLTs decided whether to accept or not. Although this research highlighted different levels of participation based on students' experiences, even those who were very active and appeared to have significant influence within their school community found it challenging to break the hierarchical structures that create power imbalances. In most cases, students act more as consultants than decision-makers, while HOSs and their SLTs serve as the primary decision-makers. However, the main differences among committees were in the number of opportunities to discuss issues with their HOSs, how much their HOSs believed in what they were doing, how effective

communication with the school community was, and how many opportunities they had to promote changes in attitudes and behaviours (pro SD).

Although the participating EkoSkola committees were not actively involved in decision-making, the HOSs' role was highly influential on them. They encouraged the committees and, on many occasions, promoted and supported their work. When the HOSs showed interest in SD, educators and students showed higher levels of participation in school initiatives organised by the EkoSkola committees. The support of the HOSs strengthened the students' leadership skills and gave the committees opportunities to lead their peers. This research also revealed 15 common personal qualities shared among the participating committees. These qualities were crucial in ensuring the effective implementation of the projects and in bringing the needed changes in behaviours and attitudes. Although it has been evidenced that members of the committees shared similar qualities, the role of the link teachers, their interest in EkoSkola, and their love towards sustainability were also very important in advocating for the committees' work and in making the necessary links with the school SLTs, educators, EkoSkola teachers, and local councils. It was clear that the more the link teachers managed their time well and found time to meet the committees, the more projects the committees were involved in. However, all the link teachers affirmed that EkoSkola was beyond their duties, and they were not given compensation, such as a reduced workload.

When the committees discussed effectiveness and the strategies used to implement their projects, a common factor emerged. All the committees worked hard to ensure that the initiatives took a whole-school approach, and all students were encouraged to participate and get actively involved. In addition, it was clear that informing the HOS and obtaining approval for specific projects was not enough, as educators and non-teaching staff played very important roles in ensuring the successful implementation of the projects. If they were not on board, the projects could become difficult to implement or even hard to initiate. Another main barrier that hindered the committees' involvement in multiple projects was time. Due to a lack of time to meet and plan, the committees had to prioritize and choose one or two projects to work on. However, the focus groups showed that all the committees planned important projects involving the local communities, but could not implement them due to time constraints, so they preferred to work on projects focused on the school environment. The participants asserted that this was mainly because the meetings were not timetabled and they only met during the break.

In addition to time, the committees also discussed funding, which hindered the implementation of projects that could have improved the school environment. From the interviews and focus groups, it emerged that to secure funding, the committees needed to participate in Litterless campaigns or other campaigns organized by the National agency. As a result, the committees have less time to focus on specific school issues, particularly those related to the school's social aspects, such as inclusion and friendship.

This study also found that a distributed leadership style provides more opportunities for students to propose new projects and to initiate changes at the school level. Despite limitations in decision-making, this leadership style tends to empower and motivate students to take a more active role in advancing their initiatives.

Existing research provides limited evidence on the role of parents in promoting ESD programs at the school and community levels. However, this study showed that parents' role is essential, as they encouraged their children, supported their initiatives, and began to follow their children's suggestions to create a more SD environment. Although limited academic evidence exists regarding disabled children or children with conditions participating in ESD programs, the four committees indicated that ESD programs are more successful when they are inclusive, ensuring that all children are valued and given opportunities to participate in various activities.

5.5 Ideas for further research

Future research could build on this study by including a larger number of schools across diverse educational sectors and contexts. This study focused on high-performing schools, whereas future studies could examine how student participation is experienced in schools with varying levels of EkoSkola engagement and project implementation effectiveness.

Moreover, future studies could adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches to scale up this research while maintaining a focus on student voice and participation. Quantitative tools, such as questionnaires, could identify broader patterns across participating schools, while qualitative tools could continue to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in greater depth.

Future research can focus on identifying indicators associated with each level of Mitra's framework, for example, opportunities for consultation (Level 1: being heard), shared planning and decision-making (Level 2: collaboration), and student-led initiatives (Level 3: student leadership). These indicators would support comparative research and contribute to a clearer understanding of how student participation develops in practice.

Using longitudinal studies, future research may examine how student participation evolves over time. In addition, future research can explore the relationship between leadership styles and the depth of student participation in EkoSkola initiatives, and compare results obtained in primary and secondary schools to better understand whether the age of students could be a determining factor in participation in decision-making and whether, in these two education sectors, there are similar or specific factors that promote or inhibit student participation.

5.6 Recommendations

Recommendation One: To enact an official ESD policy in Maltese schools

In Malta, there is a need for a policy that emphasizes ESD across both compulsory and further education. This policy will guide educators in teaching ESD across formal, informal, and non-formal settings. It should also ensure that ESD is integrated at a cross-curricular level. Additionally, it could guarantee that educators receive the necessary training and support to effectively incorporate ESD into their teaching. However, it is essential that children are actively involved throughout the entire process in drafting and finalizing the policy document. Children should be involved as decision-makers rather than just consultants. Their input is

crucial, as they can offer perspectives and suggest effective strategies that can be implemented in different schools, tailored to each school community's specific needs.

Recommendation Two: Allow committee members to act as decision makers rather than as consultants.

The school student council and EkoSkola committees need to be more actively involved in decision-making processes. Their role should go beyond mere consultation; they should also be empowered to propose ideas and lead their peers and educators in implementing SD strategies within their schools and local communities. Children must receive the necessary information from their educators, and with that knowledge, they can conduct their own research and participate actively in decision-making. This study clearly demonstrated that when children are allowed to initiate changes, they conduct research, find solutions, and become leaders in transforming attitudes and behaviours.

Recommendation Three: To allocate EkoSkola committee meetings officially in the school timetable, but not during the mid-day breaks.

One of the main barriers identified by the participating committees and link teachers was time. Students met only during their midday breaks once or twice a week. However, the participating committees reflected on the need to change this and emphasized that more importance should be given to their initiatives and work by allocating a specific amount of time during the week. They proposed scheduling students' meetings and EkoSkola committee meetings. Meetings should not be held during breaks; instead, a designated time slot should be allocated within the timetable for students to meet. Students involved in EkoSkola should have the opportunity to participate in other extracurricular and sports activities during their midday breaks, rather than being restricted to attending only EkoSkola meetings. The timetable should include sessions during the week that give students opportunities to engage in committees or clubs of their interest.

Recommendation Four: HOSs should adopt leadership styles that enable students to participate in decision-making and express themselves more openly on issues that concern them.

The research participants indicated that when their HOSs adopted a distributed form of leadership, both educators and students felt confident in proposing strategies and collaborating to create a better school environment. While the participating committees emphasized the importance of having HOSs who trust and listen to them, the participating HOSs expressed appreciation for children's involvement in creating a more sustainable environment in their schools.

The recommendation is that if HOSs value their committee's participation in implementing necessary changes and feel comfortable giving students the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns, children should be provided with more chances not only to propose ideas on decisions that have already been made but also to actively participate in decision-making that impacts the school environment and ethos. Decisions that directly affect children's learning and well-being should be made with their involvement, as their contributions are essential to

ensure that the necessary changes are implemented. If children feel that these changes negatively impact them, they should be empowered to suggest areas for improvement.

Recommendation Five: Networking with local and international EkoSkola committees

The participating committees have demonstrated effective work in their specific areas, focusing on local and school issues, but have had limited time to exchange ideas and reflections with other local or international EkoSkola committees. EkoSkola teachers should create more opportunities for committees from different schools to interact, share best practices, discuss issues, and find solutions. The findings of this research confirm the importance of committees meeting, either online or in person, to share strategies and ideas. Such initiatives could help EkoSkola committees enhance their critical thinking by questioning and understanding similar problems and determining whether similar strategies can be applied in different scenarios based on the needs of the communities involved.

Recommendation Six: EkoSkola programs should prioritize social issues and inclusion in schools.

In this research, the EkoSkola teachers discussed the importance of YRE (Young Reporters for the Environment) projects because they could provide funding to committees. However, these YRE projects mainly focus on environmental issues and cleaning campaigns. Although many committees show interest in participating in such projects, they report that, due to time constraints, their efforts are mostly dedicated to developing a school project centred on waste management or environmental conservation. While this is commendable, it leads to less attention being given to complex school issues like social concerns and the inclusion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and disabled students.

Recommendation Seven: Promote collaborations between local councils and EkoSkola committees to develop and execute ESD programs within local communities.

Local councils should increase support by providing opportunities for local citizens to train and by promoting activities that encourage SD at both local and national levels. The EkoSkola committees should be given every opportunity to build communities of learners who raise awareness and take action on necessary changes through critical thinking and the implementation of ESD programs. Moreover, local councils can offer financial assistance to the EkoSkola committees and supply the resources needed to implement strategies that promote SD within communities. I strongly recommend that members of the local council receive training in ESD and in integrating it into the community by fostering awareness, conducting research, and taking critical action on local issues affecting citizens.

Recommendation Eight: Utilizing Mitra's framework to determine the level of student participation in decision-making and the provision of training opportunities, by national coordinators, for educators and HOSs on student voice, shared decision-making and student leadership.

The study's findings underscore the importance of the National coordinators of EkoSkola and other ESD programs in supporting committees during the implementation of their projects. The findings show that student participation is strongly influenced by institutional and structural factors, and that the role of the National coordinators is to create optimal conditions for meaningful participation. This includes providing practical guidance and training opportunities to link teachers, educators, and HOSs on student voice, shared decision-making, and student leadership within EkoSkola committees.

Using Mitra's framework, the national coordinators could develop participation indicators to help schools reflect on whether students are consulted, have opportunities to collaborate with adults, or lead programs and initiatives. These indicators help schools determine whether student participation is tokenistic or moving toward meaningful engagement.

A significant barrier to participation identified in this study was time constraints. National coordinators need to continue advocating for greater recognition of ESD within schools and for the allocation of dedicated time to support the EkoSkola committee's activities. Additionally, they need to facilitate networking and the sharing of best practices among schools to strengthen student participation and encourage the development of student-led sustainability initiatives.

5.7 Final conclusions

From the research participants' experiences, it was clear that students' voices and participation have the potential to bring about changes that promote a more sustainable lifestyle. Children's perspectives helped adults realize that caring for the environment, advocating for social inclusion and justice, and fostering critical thinking can enable the community to live in peace and harmony within a healthier environment while balancing environmental, social, and economic aspects. Children have demonstrated that injustice originates from individualism, where people overlook the consequences of excessive consumerism, environmental degradation, food waste, and discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. EkoSkola provided children with the opportunity to collaborate on various initiatives, exploring ways to change their collective behaviour and create a better environment for everyone. Through research, children learned how resources could be better managed and reused whenever possible, reducing unsustainable waste, and paying more attention to the conservation of natural resources.

This research study successfully explored the three research questions, and the data collected from all participants contribute to increasing knowledge about EkoSkola initiatives and their effects on schools and local communities.

Although the general perception is that EkoSkola initiatives are effectively implemented in the four participating schools, participants' experiences show that much work remains to support these initiatives and create more opportunities for children to share their opinions and take part in decision-making. This study confirms that, in most cases, students are not leaders in decision-making processes but mainly provide feedback on decisions already made by school

leadership teams (SLTs). However, the study also offers hope to all stakeholders, as participants' experiences and perspectives suggest that children have the skills and qualities needed to tackle environmental and social issues, thereby fostering a more sustainable lifestyle.

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Appendix 1

Declaration of Geneva 1923



Declaration of Geneva

BY the present Declaration of the Rights of the Child, commonly known as the « Declaration of Geneva », men and women of all nations, recognising that Mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty that, beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed :

- I. THE CHILD must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually.
- II. THE CHILD that is hungry must be fed ; the child that is sick must be nursed ; the child that is backward must be helped ; the delinquent child must be reclaimed ; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succoured.
- III. THE CHILD must be the first to receive relief in times of distress.
- IV. THE CHILD must be put in a position to earn a livelihood and must be protected against every form of exploitation.
- V. THE CHILD must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of its fellow-men.

Picture 1: Declaration of the Rights of the Child. International Safe the Child Union, Geneva, 1923.
Retrieved from: <https://x.com/LSELibrary/status/1492151774257496072> on the 2nd of July 2025.

Appendix 2

Participation Information Sheet

Participant's Consent Forms

Participant Information Sheet

The Power of Students' Voice

My name is Randall Cilia, and I am a university student pursuing a Doctorate in Education at the University of Sheffield. I am pleased to invite you to participate in a research project. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the information below carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not to participate. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Why have you been chosen?

I would like to include you, the link teachers, support teachers, and the EkoSkola committee, in a research project (Thesis) on the impact of students' voices in promoting actions toward sustainability. My thesis will be supervised by Dr. Darren Webb and Dr. Ryan Bramley.

What is the project's purpose?

This research study will span nine months and commence in March 2023. The aims of my research are:

- i) To better understand how committees are formed and who the preferred students are to represent the whole school.
- ii) To find out whether students who form part of eco-school committees (of Green Flag schools) manage to gain the necessary skills to voice themselves and share their ideas with educators and school leadership teams.
- iii) To understand what hinders students' voices and
- iv) To investigate whether students' voices are leaving a positive impact on the leadership and management of schools.

Do you have to take part?

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide that you take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. In the eventuality that you wish to withdraw from this research, please contact me at 79062319 or send me an email at rrcilia1@sheffield.ac.uk. Please note that it will not be possible for you to withdraw your participation from this study after the 30th of December 2023, as all the data will be anonymized and included within a large dataset by that point, making it impossible to remove such data from the study.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

I will conduct an interview with you to understand i) the role of the Eco-school committee within your school, ii) the main issues students discuss with you, iii) how students within the committees voice themselves within the school and local communities. The interview will take around one hour.

I will also be observing three committee meetings held at school. The purpose of these observations is to understand the role of students in EkoSkola projects and how they contribute to their success. Students will then be interviewed in two groups and will be asked to reflect on their role in the EkoSkola program and in the promotion of sustainable development. Each interview will take about 30 minutes and there will be an interview with each group. Students will be asked about their role in the committee, and how they voice their concerns or ideas to their educators and school management teams. Other questions will explore how eco-school committees involve their peers and voice themselves at school and within their local communities.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no foreseeable discomforts, disadvantages, and/or risks involved if your son/daughter participates in this research. However, if any unexpected discomforts, disadvantages, and/or risks are experienced while participating in the research, they should be brought immediately to my attention and your child can immediately withdraw from the research.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will help participants to reflect on their roles within an eco-school and within the committees and how can eco-school programs become more effective in promoting ESD in schools.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to my research tutors. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree to me sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a data archive) then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

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When results are presented in my thesis pseudo names will be used and all participants will remain anonymous. Recordings and raw data will remain stored in the University's google drive for 6 months after the results of the thesis are issued. Then all data will be permanently erased. Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. If before the six-month period (before deletion of data), the data will be needed for further research I will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

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I would like to thank you for your time and for taking part in this research project. You can keep a copy of this information sheet for your perusal.

Sincerely,

Randall Cilia

EdD student (University of Sheffield)
rrcilia1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thesis supervisors:

Dr. Darren Webb: d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk

Dr. Ryan Bramley: r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk.

Participant Information Sheet

The Power of students' Voice

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What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

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I would like to thank you for your time and for taking part in this research project. You can keep a copy of this information sheet for your perusal.

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Participant Information Sheet

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Why has your son/daughter been chosen?

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rrcilia1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thesis supervisors:

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Dr. Ryan Bramley: r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk



Participant Consent Form

The Power of Students' Voice

Consent Form

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 15/03/2023 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed, being audio recorded, and participating in a focus group.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time/before 30/12/23; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address, etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorized researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorized researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I give permission for the audio recordings that I provide to be deposited in University's repository so they can be used for future research and learning	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Randall Cilia
rrcilia1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thesis supervisors:
Dr. Darren Webb: d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk
Dr. Ryan Bramley: r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk

Head of school: Prof Rebecca Lawthom: r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk



Participant Consent Form

The Power of students' Voice

Consent Form

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
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I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being:		
interviewed,	☐	☐
	☐	☐
being audio recorded,	☐	☐
and participating in a focus group.		
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So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.

☐☐

I agree for my child to take part:

Name of Parent

Signature

Date

Name of Child: _____ Class: _____

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Randall Cilia

rrcilia1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thesis supervisors:

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Dr. Ryan Bramley: r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk

Head of school: Prof Rebecca Lawthom: r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

Intervista' mal-Kap tal-iskola

Interview with the head of school.

1. X' importanza għandu l-kumitat ta' EkoSkola fl-iskola tiegħek?
What is the importance of the Eco-school committee at your school?
2. Kemm il- darba tiltaqa' mal-kumitat ta' EkoSkola u tiddiskutu magħhom temi relatati ma sostenibilita'?
How many times do you meet the committee and discuss themes related to sustainability?
3. X' influenza għandu l-kumitat tal-EkoSkola fuq t- tfal l-oħra?
How much influence does the committee have on its peers at school?
4. Ġieli kellek tiegħu deċiżjoni importanti fl- iskola u ikkonsultajt mal- kumitat tal- EkoSkola?
Were there occasions when you needed to make important decisions about the school and consulted the EkoSkola committee to get their opinions and feedback?
5. Taħseb li l- kumitat huwa involut biżżejjed meta iridu jittiehdu deċiżjonijiet importanti fl- iskola tiegħek? Kemm tħossok kunfidenti li tikkonsulta lil kumitat anki fuq kwistjonijiet relatati ma' ambjent tal-iskola u l-inkluzjoni soċjali?
Do you think that the committee is sufficiently involved when important decisions are made at your school? How confident are you in consulting the committee regarding issues related to the school environment and social inclusion?
6. Min jagħzel it-tfal li jiffurmaw parti mill-kumitat?
How are students chosen to form part of the committee?
7. Taħseb li l- kumitat jirrapreżenta id-diversita' li hemm fl-iskola tiegħek?
Do you think the committee represents all the cultural and social diversities within your school?
8. X' influenza għandu l- kumitat ta' Ekoskola fuq il- ġenituri u l- komunitajiet li l- popolazzjoni tal-iskola tiffurma parti minnhom?
How much does the committee influence parents and the different local communities from where the students are coming?

Intervista' mal-kumitat tal- Ekoskola (Focus group)/

Interview with the Ekoskola committee

1. X' inhuma t-temi prinċipali li tiddiskutu fil-kumitat waqt il-laqgħat li jkollkom?
What are the main themes discussed in your committee meetings?
2. Min jagħżel dawn it- temi?
Who chooses these themes?
3. X' opportunitajiet għandkom biex titkellmu fuq dawn it-temi ma' shabkom fil-klassi u l-iskola kollha?
Do you have enough chances to discuss these themes and related issues in your classes and at the school level?
4. X' tagħmlu biex it-tfal isiru jafu iżjed fuq ix-xogħol li tagħmlu bħala kumitat?
How do you promote the work of the committee? Do the other students know what the committee is working on?
5. Kemm il-darba tiltaqgħu mal-kap tal-iskola biex tiddiskutu affarijiet li jkunu qed jiġru fl-iskola u fil-komunitajiet?
How many times do you meet with the head of school to discuss issues related to sustainability experienced at the school level and in various local communities?
6. Taħsbu li bħala kumitat qegħdin tingħataw importanza mill-iskola u l- komunitajiet lokali?
Do you think the committee receives sufficient attention and importance from the school and the local communities?
7. Hemm attivitajiet li xtaqtu tagħmlu fl-iskola jew barra l-iskola imma ma stajtux tagħmluhom?
Were there any activities you planned to organize at school or outside of school that you were not allowed to do?
8. Ġieli saqsewkom fuq kif l-ambjent tal- iskola ikun aħjar u kif jistgħu jonqsu diffikultajiet relatati ma' inkluzjoni ta' tfal li ġejjin minn kulturi differenti jew tfal li għandhom bżonnijiet speċjali?
Were there any occasions where educators consulted you on how to improve the school environment and on how to reduce issues related to the inclusion of students with diverse cultural backgrounds or with special needs?
9. X' bidliet tixtiequ li bħala kumitat taraw fl-iskola tagħkom u fil-komunitajiet li tgħixu fihom?
What are the main changes that you would like to see at your school and within your local communities?

- 10.** Taħsbu li bħala kumitat tistgħu iġġibu dawn il- bidliet li tixtiequ? **Do you think that as a committee you will manage to bring forward these changes?**

Intervista' mal- Link teachers/Support teachers/

Interview with the link teachers/Support teachers.

1. X' inhuma t-temi principali li tiddiskutu fil-kumitat waqt il-laqgħat li jkollkom?
What are the main themes discussed during committee meetings?
2. Min jagħzel dawn it-temi?
Who chooses these themes?
3. X' opportunitajiet għandhom biex jittkellmu fuq dawn it-temi ma shabhom fil-klassi u l-iskola kollha?
Do they have enough opportunities to discuss these themes and related issues in their classes and at the school level?
4. Kif it-tfal jagħmlu promozzjoni tax-xogħol tagħhom ma' shabhom?
How do the committee members promote their work with their peers?
5. Taħseb li l-kumitat qiegħed jingħata importanza biżżejjed mill-iskola u l-komunitajiet lokali?
Do you think the school and local communities give enough attention and importance to the committee?
6. Kemm taħseb li l-kumitat irnexxielu iġib bidliet fl-iskola u x inhuma d-diffikultajiet li jiltaqgħu magħhom biex iġibu l-bidliet meħtieġa?
Do you think that the committee managed to bring forward the necessary changes within the school? What were the main difficulties faced in bringing such changes?
7. Ġieli kien hemm mument li l-kumitat kien ikkonsultat mill-kap tal-iskola fuq kif jixtiequ jittgħallmu t-tfal fil-klassi u kif jista' jinbidel l-ambjent tal-iskola biex ikun iktar inklussiv?
Were there instances when the head of school consulted the committee to discuss ways learners can enhance their classroom experiences and how to make the school environment more inclusive?
8. X' influenza għandu dan il-kumitat fuq l-komunitajiet lokali u fuq it-tmexxija tal-iskola?
How much influence does this committee have on decisions made by the school leadership and the local communities (from where students come)?

Appendix 4

**Approval from the School of Education Ethics Review Panel at the
University of Sheffield**

Final Decision on Application

Approved

Comments on approval:

The reviewers asked for a number of clarifications - these are not serious enough to withhold approval, but are listed here so that you can take them into account for your research:

It would be helpful when discussing child respondents to discuss their recruitment to the two different strands of data collection that would involve them - observations of committee meetings and focus group interviews.

Can students consent to take part in one and not the other - e.g. in the committee meeting but not the interview?

Depending on your response to this question, you may need to update your student and parent information letters.

It would be helpful to make it clear in all letters how your observations of the committee meetings will be recorded. You state that interviews will be audio recorded, but I am not clear how the committee observations will be recorded.

In your letters for principals and directors of study, you state that student consent will be voluntary, but do not provide a similar statement about teacher consent.

Appendix 5

Excerpts with memos, codings, and thoughts

Committee
Melita

Noella: We always did what we planned because of the teamwork. Our EkoSkola group is fortunate because it is a nice group; we work together and give others opportunities to work with us. We can move forward because we have this teamwork.

Lisa: Yes, because we support each other, and we were always successful with our teamwork.

Noella: I think that teamwork in our group is a strong factor, and I think that we can move very far thanks to this.

Teamwork!
Importance
and how
happy they
are with
the team.

EkoSkola
teacher
Santos

For example, yesterday, during the EkoSkola Summit, one of the students told me that we are not learning how to deal with stress. Unfortunately, we are trying to get by with these things. However, to acquire 21st-century skills, we need to provide public speaking, ownership, and voice. That is why EkoSkola needs to be featured in the school timetable.

Students are
aware of
which skills
they need to
acquire.

Link Teacher
Santos

Changes occur depending on the amount of time invested and how much support you give the committee. When I started, one of the biggest problems was to change my lessons as well, since I am a Science teacher. If I hadn't done that, if I had not been flexible in my work, and if I hadn't tried to amalgamate the Learning outcomes and find more time for the students to think and discuss, I think things would not have changed.

Cross-curricular

EkoSkola
teacher
Kammuna

When you measure success, the tendency is to look at it positively, and this gives you more energy to work. Even with a simple photo. What do we tell them? Take photos so that you can see the before and after state of the object. Because we forget, you forget with time. Our life is so hectic that even students forget... So, you have to keep a good picture of where you have started. That is why slow progress is progress.

How to
determine
progress??
Avoiding
helplessness.

Kemmura
HOS
Carmen.
Leadership

I can admit that this year, maybe because I know that the HOD works a lot on EkoSkola, so I had put my mind at rest, I didn't give enough time to EkoSkola. However, there were so many things: examinations and sorting of papers, supervision, I needed time to guide my deputies, because, like me, they were all new here. So I had to focus on giving them support so that they would not feel at a loss because there was no one to guide them. I aimed to see that all the work is done. So, yes, in this case, I could not find time to speak to the committee and listen to them. But now I can.

HOS priorities
Meeting with
committee

Committee
Filola

Liam: Yes, I think we see that need. We have a lot of different opinions. So I think we will perform better if we have his input.

Amber: Since he takes care of our school and he decides, he gives approvals, we can discuss with him and find different ways how we can work together.

Meeting with
HOS.
Importance of
HOS for
committee.

HOS
Katie
Melita.

Yes, consultation is done even on small things, for example, when we are organizing the Christmas party and there is a supplier that is insisting on, although it is a frivolous example, on supplying muffins wrapped in plastic. We discuss with them how to avoid plastic and find ways how we can replace plastic to reduce it as much as possible.

Consultation
change in
attitude of
HOS & staff.

Committee
Melita.

Ella: Yes, because we are doing something good. We joined EkoSkola to do something, and we are not forced to do anything. We are here because we want to, and so we are doing something that we enjoy.

Kim: And I think, and I think this is common to the whole committee, we feel very comfortable talking about something right to do. We are making our world better, even for example, when tourists come to Malta, and even for the Maltese, we are making our place better.

Lisa: At the same time, we are creating awareness about certain things that are problematic, for example, climate change.

Dialogue.
Students
believe in
themselves
and their
capabilities