

LEADING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ON EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN KARACHI'S PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS THE CONNECTING CLASSROOMS PROJECT

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Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has gained a strong consensus as a core element of the Sustainable Development Goals, and an integral part of modern education systems. It depends on the commitment of all stakeholders, especially the school leadership to encourage a culture of sustainability in the school. This qualitative study with case study design explored how school leadership contributes to the implementation and sustainability of the British Council's Connecting Classrooms Project in the field of ESD in private secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan. The data were gathered from 18 participants using purposive sampling by in-depth face-to-face interviews. All audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. The results indicated that distributed, collaborative, and contextual leadership practices contributed to the sustainability of ESD initiatives. The following key themes emerged as important factors to sustain ESD and build long-term education transformation: curriculum integration, teacher professional development, institutional support, international collaboration, and supportive policy frameworks.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), School Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Connecting Classrooms Programme, Private Secondary Schools, Sustainable Development Goals.

INTRODUCTION

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has emerged as a transformative educational approach that equips learners with the knowledge, competencies, values, and attitudes necessary to address complex environmental, social, and economic challenges while contributing to sustainable development. With the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, education is considered as a fundamental tool to build responsible citizens who can foster environmental sustainability, social justice, and economic well-being (UNESCO, 2020). ESD is not about just academic outcomes, it's about developing critical thinking, systems thinking, collaborative skills, problem solving, and responsible decision making to enable learners to effectively react to local and global sustainability challenges (Rieckmann, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap (ESD for 2030) calls for a whole-

school approach – with sustainability integrated into the curriculum, pedagogy, leadership and governance, school operations and community engagement (UNESCO, 2020). It is important to stress that education can only be transformed to be sustainable if the institutions are committed, there is collaborative leadership, teacher capacity is developed, and stakeholders are involved in the process. However, more recent assessments of the ESD for 2030 framework suggest that many countries have included sustainability in their national education policies, but there are still problems of institutionalizing ESD in schools, including a lack of teacher preparation, of monitoring processes, and of resources, as well as problems of leadership (UNESCO, 2026).

Leadership is a consistent finding as one of the most critical factors for successful ESD implementation. School leaders influence the organizational culture, set priorities, distribute resources, support teacher professional development, and build partnerships which support sustainability efforts (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020). Effective leaders also promote distributed leadership, collective decision-making and ongoing organisational learning, fostering a context that allows sustainability to become ingrained in the fabric of school life, not an isolated set of activities (Ghamrawi, 2023; Verhelst et al., 2023). Recent research also indicates that sustainable leadership contributes to increased capacity in schools to sustain educational innovations, through increased collective responsibility, commitment of teachers and organisational resilience (Madsen et al., 2023).

International cooperation has also helped to boost the implementation of ESD, as it allows schools to share best practices, gain insights from others, and build a global citizenship. Partnerships bring teachers and students into contact with different views on sustainability and facilitate a process of interculturality, professional development and mutual problem solving (UNESCO, 2020). The Connecting Classrooms Project, a British Council initiative, is one of the most impactful programs to assist these goals by encouraging schools to embed sustainability, global citizenship education and international collaboration into education, leadership and school improvement. The programme aims to improve the quality of education and support sustainable school development through teacher professional development, student-centred projects and school-to-school partnerships with schools internationally (British Council, 2022). As many such programmes have been launched, however, there is still no clarity on how effective they are when leveraged away and resources are depleted.

The significance of ESD is also being raised as Pakistan is striving to meet the targets of SDGs and to enhance the quality of education. There has been a growing recognition of the need to embed the concepts of environmental sustainability, global citizenship and responsible resource management within the education curriculum, both nationally and within the education sector. However, there are disparities in schools in the implementation of ESD, which are associated with the capacity of the school leaders, support provided by the school, teachers' readiness to implement ESD, and educational resources available (Saqib et al., 2020). The attitudes of teachers towards sustainability are positive, but however, many teachers are not prepared professionally to apply ESD in classroom practice and are not provided with the institutional support for the same (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017; Saqib et al., 2020). They present a call for action to increase leadership and organisational commitment for the effective embedding of sustainability into school improvement, not as a separate education program.

The private schools in Karachi have been instrumental in bringing innovative education practices within the framework of international programmes and partnerships. The British Council's Connecting

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Classrooms Project has been amongst these programs, which have facilitated schools to improve global citizenship education and embed sustainability into the curriculum and collaborative leadership practices. Participating schools have used intercultural partnerships, CDEs, and students' projects to promote intercultural understanding, environmental responsibility, and community engagement (British Council, 2022). The programme has also helped schools to take a collaborative approach to leadership through partnering with principals, ISA coordinators, teachers, students, and community members to plan and execute sustainability initiatives.

Despite all these developments, there is little empirical evidence available on the long term impact and sustainability of ESD initiatives in the Connecting Classrooms Project in Pakistan. The previous literature has addressed the issue of environmental education, teachers' attitudes towards sustainable development, curriculum integration, and students' awareness of sustainable development (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017; Saqib et al., 2020). There are comparatively less studies that have investigated the impact of school leadership on the sustainability of ESD programmes once support from external programmes has ceased. Likewise, there has been little investigation of the enduring impact of the leadership behaviours resulting from international collaboration programmes on school culture, teacher collaboration, student learning and community involvement.

The role of school leadership in supporting educational innovation is gaining more attention in the literature, as its influence on the vision of the school, commitment of all stakeholders, mobilisation of resources, and continuous professional learning (Ghamrawi, 2023; Verhelst et al., 2023) is increasingly recognised as a determining factor in sustaining educational innovation. Leaders promoting distributed leadership and collaborative decision making are more likely to establish structures that make sustainability part of the school's day-to-day activities and not rely on individual champions and externally funded projects. Therefore, the link between school leadership and the sustainability of ESD efforts is critical for recognizing and highlighting strategies for supporting long-term educational improvement and institutional resiliency.

In this regard, the study aims to explore the effects of school leadership on the implementation and sustainability of the Education for Sustainable Development in private secondary schools of Karachi which participated in the British Council's Connecting Classrooms Project, in order to fill in the gaps. In particular, it asks what the students, teachers, school culture and community feel the impact of ESD and Connecting Classrooms Project has been and how far the impact has spread beyond the programme. The research explores the obstacles faced by the schools and policy measures and leadership practices that should be undertaken to boost and sustain ESD efforts within the Pakistani education system.

Research Questions

This research paper aims to examine the role of school leadership in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) implementation and sustainability with the private secondary schools of Karachi, Pakistan. Especially with regard to,

- 1. To measure the impact of ESD and the Connecting Classrooms Project on students, staff, school culture and community participation and the sustainability of ESD and the Connecting Classrooms*

Project.

2. To understand the challenges and policy interventions for enhancing and maintaining implementation of ESD in Pakistani schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Educating for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is now a key aspect of the global educational reform initiative because it can provide children and young people with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes they need to face current environmental, social, and economic issues. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely SDG 4.7, underscore the importance of education for sustainability, global citizenship and responsible decision making (UNESCO, 2020). The development of the UNESCO's ESD for 2030 is about a transformative approach, in which sustainability is not seen as a separate subject but is embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, school governance, leadership and community partnerships (UNESCO, 2020). The approach also highlights the need for a whole-school approach in schools to enable learners to become active participants in sustainable development.

The recent research suggests that ESD goes beyond environmental consciousness to include systems thinking, critical reflection, working collaboratively and being responsible for ethics (Wamsler, 2020; Gough, 2022). These skills help students appreciate the interdependency of sustainability issues, and become engaged in finding practical solutions to them in their local communities. Thus, ESD is gradually being considered as a process of learning that transforms learners for lifelong learning and responsible citizenship. However, UNESCO (2026) reports that despite many education systems still struggling to turn sustainability policies into sustainable institutional practices, effective school leadership and commitment is crucial.

Shared leadership model, school leadership, and ESD

The role of leadership within schools has been acknowledged as one of the most effective school level influences on school improvement and innovation. In the context of ESD, school leaders are expected to create an ESD vision, foster collaborative cultures, manage resources well, and provide opportunities for teachers and students to be actively involved in ESD initiatives (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020). Sustainable school leadership is not just about what goes on at the school level; it involves introducing sustainable principles into the organizational culture, school development planning, curriculum delivery and the involvement of stakeholders (Ghamrawi, 2023).

The new studies show that leadership plays a significant role in teachers' commitment to sustainability education practices by providing them with professional support, providing guidance in their teaching, and engaging them in decision-making (Verhelst et al., 2023). Leaders who create conditions for innovation, reflective practice and distributed leadership are more effective in the institutionalization of ESD as they foster collective ownership and leadership rather than relying solely on individual leadership. Furthermore, leadership has a crucial role in fostering organisational resilience to benefit the sustainability of educational innovations following the expire of external funding or programme support (Madsen et al., 2023). The results of this study are significant in the context of the current study that focuses on the role of school leadership in maintaining the results of the British Council Connecting Classrooms Project in private secondary schools of Karachi.

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Distributed Leadership for Sustainability

Educating for sustainable development needs to be led by both principals and teachers, along with coordinating teachers, students, and community leaders. Distributed leadership helps to build the capacity of schools to create sustainable educational change by fostering collaborative decision making, shared responsibility, and shared knowledge (Harris, 2020). Distributed leadership is about involving a variety of teachers and stakeholders in the process of planning, implementing and assessing sustainability initiatives by not only school principals.

The research shows that distributed leadership has a positive effect on the motivation of teachers, organisation of learning and collaboration between schools implementing ESD (Verhelst et al., 2023). It also challenges teachers to think innovatively about how they can teach and help students learn in a way that goes beyond the books, and it gives students a chance to be leaders in environmental campaigns, service-learning projects and community initiatives. These are also effective ways to foster the sustainability of ESD initiatives as they are not relying on the efforts of any one entity to lead the effort.

Whole-School Approach

The whole school approach is considered one of the most successful strategies for the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development, since it brings sustainability to all aspects of school life. UNESCO (2020) suggests that schools integrate leadership and governance, curriculum, teaching, campus management, student engagement and community partnerships to build a cohesive learning environment for sustainability. This helps the school to showcase sustainable practices and encourage pupils to think about sustainability in real-life situations.

The studies have demonstrated that schools that employ a whole-school approach have more effective collaboration between teachers, higher levels of engagement amongst students, a higher level of organisational commitment, and a higher level of involvement from the community (Mogren et al., 2019). These institutional changes are greatly facilitated by the coordination carried out by school leaders who integrate institutional vision, policies, and practices into sustainability objectives (Ghamrawi, 2023). The whole-school approach is therefore of great relevance when considering the implementation and sustainability of ESD, and is particularly relevant to the assessment of long-term effects of the Connecting Classrooms Project. However, those participating recognised that larger international projects were harder to maintain due to the need for external partnerships, financial resources and the need for a constant co-ordination.

Teacher Professional Development

Teachers are the primary agents responsible for translating ESD principles into classroom practice; therefore, continuous professional development is essential for successful implementation. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that teachers require interdisciplinary knowledge, innovative pedagogical skills, and sustainability competencies to facilitate inquiry-based and experiential learning. Professional development programmes also strengthen teachers' confidence, improve curriculum integration, and encourage reflective practice, enabling them to address sustainability issues effectively (Saqib et al., 2020).

Leadership support is equally important because school leaders influence teachers' willingness to adopt innovative teaching practices by providing mentoring, professional learning opportunities, and collaborative working environments (Leithwood et al., 2020). Teacher development has been oriented towards global citizenship education and partnership in international initiatives like the British Council Connecting Classrooms Project, as well as collaborative learning. These opportunities develop teachers' teaching skills and extend their sustainability knowledge. But studies indicate that some level of follow-up institutional support and leadership is needed after the initial externally funded professional development programs in order to sustain the impact of the professional development (Verhelst et al., 2023), which clearly links teacher capacity building with the sustainability of ESD initiatives explored in this study.

Community Engagement

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has an important aspect of community engagement, since achieving sustainable development is not a task that can be done by schools alone. UNESCO (2020) underscores the importance of collaboration between schools, families, communities, government and civil society groups to provide more meaningful learning experiences and foster a broader sense of responsibility for sustainable development. Community based projects allow students to utilize classroom instruction and practices in a real-world context, build civic engagement, environmental awareness and social involvement.

School leadership is crucial to supporting these partnerships in the sense that they facilitate partnerships with parents, community organisations and local stakeholders. Past studies have demonstrated that partnerships between school and the community positively impact student outcomes, school culture, and stakeholder buy-in of school sustainability efforts (Epstein, 2018; Ghamrawi, 2023). In addition, community engagement is an important element to the long-term sustainability of ESD, because it brings learning out of the classroom and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for sustainability. The outcomes are directly linked to the first research goal of this study relating to the impact of ESD and the Connecting Classrooms Project on community participation and the sustainability of programme outcomes.

International Cooperation and the British Council Connecting Classrooms Project

Cooperation among countries has become one of the major means to enhance ESD through knowledge sharing, innovative teaching and learning, and building of global citizenship skills. International cooperation helps students and teachers to learn about the sustainable development issues facing the world, and how to value the difference in cultures and through cooperation solve problems (UNESCO, 2020). Cooperation also enhances institutional learning through the sharing of experiences of good practice in education in various settings.

One of the most well-known projects in the field of global learning and sustainable development in schools is the Connecting Classrooms Project of the British Council. The programme facilitates such partnerships by enhancing the teaching skills of teachers, coordinating projects, hosting student exchanges and leadership development events (British Council, 2022). Schools involved incorporate sustainability, global citizenship and intercultural understanding in their curriculum and actively engage their students as actors in their community.

The findings show that the international school partnership programmes have a positive impact on

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teachers' pedagogical practices, students' intercultural awareness, and collaborative leadership in schools (British Council, 2022). But as researchers have said, maintaining these outcomes when external funding and programme assistance end is a major challenge to achieve (UNESCO, 2026). Many schools have a difficult time sustaining ESD beyond project time, without ongoing leadership support, institutional support, and policy integration. There are a number of private schools in Karachi that have taken part in the Connecting Classrooms Project and earned the International School Award (ISA); however, there are few empirical studies to demonstrate the long-term effects of the programme on the students, teachers, school climate and community. To fill this gap this study investigates participants' perceptions of the sustainability of the programme once it has been completed.

The challenges for ESD Implementation in Pakistan

Although Pakistan is pursuing SDGs, there are still a number of institutional and contextual issues faced in the implementation of ESD across schools. Low resource investment, including a shortage of financial and instructional support, curriculum overload, lack of policy implementation, and poor institutional support, have been reported as the major barriers to integrating sustainability into education in the previous studies (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017; Saqib et al., 2020). The problems that often arise lead to piecemeal solutions to sustainability instead of implementation at school level.

Leadership capacity also plays a role in the effectiveness of the implementation of ESD. School leaders often find themselves struggling with competing institutional priorities, avenues for professional development, and guidance from policies to integrate sustainability into school improvement plans (Ali et al., 2024). Additionally, sustainability programmes are reliant on externally financed projects, and can be challenging to maintain after the programme support has ceased. The results of this study make it clear that the role of leadership in enhancing institutional commitment and continuity of ESD initiatives in Pakistani schools is very important.

Policy Implications

The literature indicates that there is a need to build up ESD through in-depth educational policies, that include sustainability in the curriculum, in school leadership, and teacher education and quality assurance processes (UNESCO, 2020). Implementation will also require ongoing investment in the professional development, leadership development and collaboration between schools, government agencies, higher education institutions and international organisations. National education policies should therefore shift from short-term projects, to the institutionalisation of sustainability based on long-term planning, monitoring and resource allocation. These policy interventions are critical to the upkeep of ESD implementation, and are in line with the second objective of this study which aims to find ways to reinforce and sustain ESD in schools in Pakistan.

While there is extensive research on Education for Sustainable Development, sustainable leadership and whole-school approaches, there is a lack of empirical evidence to the long-term sustainability of ESD that is being practiced through international collaboration programmes in Pakistan. Previous research in Pakistan has been mainly on teachers' sustainability awareness, curriculum integration and EE, while less research has been done on the leadership practices used to sustain ESD post-externally funded programmes (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017; Saqib et al., 2020). In

addition, there is limited research that investigates private secondary school principals, ISA coordinators and teachers' experiences with the British Council Connecting Classrooms Project.

The study seeks to examine how school leadership affects impact and sustainability of ESD in private secondary schools in the city of Karachi, involved in the Connecting Classrooms Project, to fill these gaps. In particular, it examines the possible effects of ESD on the students, teachers, school culture, and community engagement, and outlines the leadership practices, implementation challenges and policy interventions needed to support and sustain ESD implementation in Pakistan. The study also adds to the developing body of literature on educational leadership for sustainability, and offers policy-, school and learning-practitioner oriented recommendations based on the evidence.

3. METHODOLOGY

The case study design was used in this study to understand the experiences and perspectives of participants with an in-depth examination of the responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employed purposive sampling to select 18 participants, comprising an equal number of principals, ISA coordinators, and teachers (33.3% each), who had direct experience of implementing the International School Award (ISA) under the British Council's Connecting Classrooms programme. The participants were selected based on their knowledge and experience of implementing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiatives in their schools (Campbell et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample consisted of 61.1% female and 38.9% male participants, with most aged 30–39 years (44.4%), and overall, they were well qualified, with the majority holding postgraduate degrees. Participants also had substantial professional experience, with the largest group reporting 11–15 years of teaching experience (27.8%), while most (55.6%) had 1–5 years of leadership experience. Regarding ISA involvement, 44.4% had participated for less than one year, whereas the remainder had between 1 and more than 6 years of experience. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide, enabling participants to share rich and detailed accounts relevant to the research objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The results of the thematic analysis carried out to explore how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is implemented and sustained in private secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan and the influence of school leadership on their implementation and sustainability. The results are presented on the basis of the two research questions and are based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. The discussion incorporates the experiences of the participants along with the selected literature from the national and international context to interpret the results and draw out implications for school leadership, institutional development and educational policy.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The interview transcripts were read multiple times, coded, and sorted into categories, themes and sub-themes. Themes were expert validated for credibility. The results showed certain patterns regarding leadership practices, collaboration, institutional challenges and the implementation and sustainability of Education for Sustainable Development (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

5. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in line with the two research questions and based on thematic analysis

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of the semi-structured interviews. The views of participants and relevant national and international literature are included in the discussion to gain deeper insight into the findings and implications for practice are drawn with regard to leadership, institutional development and educational policy. The findings cover the perceived impacts of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the British Council's Connecting Classrooms Programme on the students, teachers, school culture, and community engagement, and the sustainability of these impacts beyond the programme.

Research Question 1 looks at the role of leadership in the implementation and sustainability of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the participating schools. The results show that leadership and decision making together leads to teacher autonomy, distributed leadership and shared responsibility for ESD implementation. Participants also suggested a need to strike a balance between programme documentation and meaningful teaching and learning experiences, and pointed out the need for institutional support and curriculum integration in embedding sustainability in school practices. Moreover, institutionalisation of sustainability within school policy and practice, teacher empowerment and leadership commitment were recognized as being crucial for maintaining ESD beyond the scope of the Connecting Classrooms Programme.

Research Question 2 is based on education for sustainable development (ESD) in schools, and what improvements are needed to increase the implementation and sustainability of ESD in schools. The results indicate that there is a need for improved leadership through participatory decision making, a balance between accountability and teacher autonomy, better institutional support by embedding ESD more systematically in the curriculum and a long-term policy framework that can provide long-term guidance, resources, and commitment for embedding ESD into school systems and practices.

The discussion is structured around the research questions to offer a structured analysis of the results, identifying points of agreement and disagreement with previous research and what this means for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and for the Connecting Classrooms programme of the British Council.

Theme 1: Leadership and Decision-Making in ESD

The results showed that good leadership at school was pivotal to the successful implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the British Council's Connecting Classrooms Project. The principal was found to be the strategic player who approves sustainability projects, allocates resources and ensures that projects are in line with the school's vision and priorities, as participants consistently reported. The process of decision-making was collaborative but structured, with decision-making usually being the prerogative of the school leadership, with ideas and input from the ISA coordinators and teachers.

The following is to be expected, one ISA coordinator explained:

“Project ideas were discussed together, however, the final decision was always made by the principal as all activities needed to be in line with the school vision and resources” (T-1)

Likewise, a principal said:

“Teachers were encouraged to participate and their ideas were welcomed but it was the job of leadership to make the projects practical, achievable and beneficial for students” (C-5)

These results suggest that the leadership in the schools that participated included collaborative consultation and accountability from leadership. This type of collaboration allowed schools to better align their sustainability activities and keep the activity within the school coherent. This discovery is aligned with the UN (2030) framework on ESD for 2030 that places school leadership as a key factor to integrate sustainability into the governance of schools, the curriculum, and the culture of the schools. Ghamrawi (2023) further states that sustainable school leaders establish a vision that fosters unity and continuity in the school. In the context of Pakistan, Saqib et al. (2020) also found that leadership commitment is also a significant factor which helps schools to incorporate sustainability in the educational system. Based on the results, it was found that leadership was not only administrative, but was also a tool to institutionalize ESD and to sustain ESD programme implementation.

Theme 2: Teacher autonomy and distributed leadership

Another significant finding was that of teacher autonomy in a distributed leadership. Learners recognised that teachers were encouraged to participate in planning sustainability activities, and had flexibility in implementing classroom based ESD initiatives. The autonomy, however, was contained within institutional limits: a significant degree of autonomy was reserved for school leaders in making decisions about international projects, budgets and strategic planning.

One teacher commented:

“We were given autonomy in designing classroom activities but larger projects had to be approved by the principal and ISA coordinator” (C-6)

The participants felt positive about this guided autonomy because it was a blend of creativity and organisational responsibility. However, some of the respondents felt that giving teachers more input into strategic decision-making would improve ownership and drive more innovation with the implementation of ESD. The findings are in line with the principles of distributed leadership, which focus on shared responsibility and collaborative decision making as key to sustainable school improvement (Harris, 2020). Verhelst et al. (2023) also discovered that distributed leadership in school is associated with higher teacher engagement, organizational learning and sustainability in school. In Pakistan, Kalsoom and Khanam (2017) also emphasised that empowering teachers through professional trust and collaborative leadership enhances the successful implementation of sustainability education. It is, therefore, important to consider how the participating schools illustrated aspects of distributed leadership and the further development of teachers' decision-making power to enhance the sustainability of ESD beyond external programmes.

Theme 3: Documentation versus meaningful learning

The results confirmed that while documentation was a fundamental part of the British Council's Connecting Classrooms Project and the International School Award (ISA), participants felt that too much focus on gathering evidence sometimes took focus away from quality teaching and learning. Much time was spent on preparing reports, photos, portfolios and other documentation demonstrating the implementation of projects, with some teachers and ISA coordinators compromising on reflective learning and engagement with students for this purpose.

According to one ISA coordinator, "That's the best I can say.

“At times we would end up spending more time preparing evidence for the award than on reflecting on what students had actually learned as a result of the activities.” (T-5)

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The results indicate that while accountability mechanisms enhanced programme monitoring, over-burdensome administration could compromise ESD from a learning process to a regime of compliance. UNESCO (2020) states that meaningful learning experiences and the acquisition of critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities and sustainability skills are more important for ESD than the documentation and reporting. In the same way, Wamsler (2020) states that transformative Sustainability Education is not a matter of “doing what we are told,” but rather “learning through doing,” and “reflective learning.” In Pakistan, some teachers also face constrictions in their ability to practice innovative sustainability due to administrative requirements and insufficient institutional capacity as pointed out by Saqib et al. (2020). Hence, a more well-rounded and responsible strategy that allows for both accountability and genuine learning experiences would be more effective in improving the educational value of ESD efforts.

Theme 4: Institutional supports and curriculum integration

The participants consistently highlighted the need for a long-term approach to institutional commitment, as opposed to short-term project-based approaches, to ensure the success of ESD. They felt sustainability needs to be formally embedded in the curriculum, in school policy and strategic planning, and that ESD should be part of school life, not an afterthought. The participants also emphasized the need for constant leadership support, teachers training, and good provision of resources to sustain the programme momentum.

One principal remarked:

“Until ESD is integrated into the curriculum and into school policy, it will rely on individual teachers and coordinators.” (C-2)

The identification is aligned with the approach of UNESCO (2020) that calls for a whole-school approach where sustainability is integrated into the curriculum, governance, leadership and organisational culture. In a similar finding, Verhelst et al., (2023) also found that institutional support is necessary for sustaining education innovations beyond externally funded initiatives. The studies also indicate that for the enhancement of ESD implementation in schools, there is a need for curriculum integration, leadership commitment and continuous teacher capacity building, which is supported by the studies done in Pakistan (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017; Saqib et al., 2020). From these findings, it can now be concluded that the institutionalization of ESD by implementing formal policies and embedding ESD activities in the curriculum is essential to the continuity of ESD.

Theme 5: Sustainability of ESD beyond the Connecting Classrooms Programme

The findings showed that many practices implemented as part of the Connecting Classrooms Project continued after the programme had ended as these practices had become part of school's routines and culture. Several of the schools continued with environmental campaigns, school led activities, collaborative learning, and community service projects. However, those participating recognised that larger international projects were harder to maintain due to the need for external partnerships, financial resources and the need for a constant co-ordination.

A participant explained:

“The values and activities remained in our school, but it was not easy to sustain international

partnerships without external support.” (T-4)

The results point to the need for effective school leadership, shared responsibility, institutional commitment and policy support to ensure the sustainability of ESD. UNESCO (2026) also states that when schools integrate ESD into their structures, it becomes sustainable over time as opposed to being a time-limited project. Similarly, Ghamrawi (2023) stresses that sustainable leadership creates a more resilient organisation through the establishment of collaborative cultures and continuous improvement. Based on the current results, it would appear that meaningful educational change can be initiated and sustained through the Connecting Classrooms Project, but that it needs the sustained support of leadership, institutional support, and policy investment.

Overall, the results showed that the leadership in the participating private secondary schools was key in determining the impact and sustainability of Education for Sustainable Development. Collaborative leadership, guided teacher autonomy, institutional support and curriculum integration were important factors in sustaining ESD practices beyond the Connecting Classrooms Programme. Meanwhile, participants pointed to issues of administrative documentation, lack of teacher involvement in strategic decision making, and reliance on external support. These results support the first research question by indicating that the sustainability of ESD depends on a whole-school approach which involves empowering teachers, demonstrating engagement from the school, and having supportive policies in place within the system.

The findings related to the needed improvements and policy changes to enhance and maintain Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Private Secondary Schools. Themes emphasize participants' suggestions for improving leadership, curriculum integration, institutional support, teacher autonomy and sustainability of ESD initiatives.

Theme 6: Strengthening leadership and participatory decision-making.

The results indicate that there is a need for a more participatory and collaborative approach to leadership to enhance Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Participants were generally consistent in saying that there was a place for principals, ISA coordinators and teachers to contribute ideas for ESD, however principals were consistently seen as having the final say. This hierarchical setup provided institutional accountability and reduced teachers' power within the system of strategic decision making.

One principal explained:

“The projects would typically start with the ISA coordinator's ideas about themes and linking up with partners; but sometimes, I was also initiating projects when I felt that the project would be useful to embed ESD within the aims of the organization.” (P-1)

Another participant noted:

“Sometimes, teachers had ideas, particularly when they reflected on ideas connected with their fields, and the ISA coordinator approved the ideas.” (P-4)

The results show that the role of the teachers in the process of idea generation was an advisory rather than decision-making one. The results align with UNESCO's ESD for 2030 programme, which emphasizes on the need to have shared responsibility, collaborative governance and involve stakeholders throughout the school community in effective sustainability leadership (UNESCO, 2020). Likewise, Holst (2022) claims that distributed leadership reinforces institutional ownership by enabling

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teachers to be active change agents in education. Prenger et al. (2022) additionally argue that shared leadership encourages innovation and sustainability in the long term, as they are distributed across the organisation and not concentrated in one leadership role. Thus, enhancing participatory decision making would help schools to institutionalize ESD more effectively, whilst bringing teachers into a greater commitment and ownership of sustainability.

Theme 7: A balance of accountability and teacher autonomy

The results also show that sustainable ESD is dependent on a balance between institutional accountability and teachers' professional autonomy. Participants recognized that there was a fair amount of flexibility in bringing in projects into the classroom environment, while larger schoolwide and international projects were more complicated with more approvals and administrative controls needed. As a result, the level of autonomy teachers had was different according to the size and apparent threat of the project.

One coordinator explained:

“In larger projects, one would need to make the decisions and then get approval; in smaller projects in the classroom, one would be more independent on decisions.” (C-2)

Likewise, another participant said:

“There was more autonomy with smaller tasks, but with larger projects you had to plan more and coordinate, so it was more structured.” (P-2)

The results indicate that there is a need for accountability mechanisms to promote organisational coherence and quality assurance, and that such mechanisms should not be so tightly managed that they limit teacher creativity and responsiveness to pupils' learning needs. Teachers should be trusted as professional decision makers who can adapt the SE to local contexts, as UNESCO (2020) states. Similarly, Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) state that building professional trust fosters teachers' motivation and motivates them to integrate innovative pedagogical approaches. Keeping with the context of Pakistan, Saqib et al. (2020) also concluded that leadership support and teacher empowerment are crucial to the process of incorporating ESD into the mainstream of classroom practice. Thus, leadership models that keep accountability while offer teachers greater professional autonomy are needed so that ESD can be implemented more innovatively, contextually and sustainably.

Theme 8: Enhance institutional support and integration into the curriculum.

The results have shown that the sustainability of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is strongly related to strong institutional support and formal embedding in the school curriculum. Participants always expressed the view that ESD should not be considered as an optional or project-based activity but should be an integral part of teaching, learning and school policy. They felt that if ESD were embedded in the curriculum then the schools could achieve consistency, continuity and long-term implementation. Moreover, participants highlighted the need to have continuous monitoring, institutional planning and leadership commitment to keep the sustainability initiatives effective beyond the programme funded by external sources.

One principal stated:

“This is just something that I think should be part of the curriculum, and not be an extra, or an

optional activity. This would ensure that schools are consistent, long lasting and consistent with each other.” (P-1)

In the same manner, another participant said:

“It would be more effective if it was integrated into the curriculum, monitored, maintained and continued over time.” (P-3)

The results show that curriculum integration has to be accompanied by systematic monitoring, institutional planning and continuous commitment of leadership if it is to be successful. This result is in line with the plan for 2030 on ESD for the UNESCO, which states that the integration of sustainability should be embedded in curriculum, school governance, leadership and school culture, instead of being implemented in isolated projects (UNESCO, 2020). Similarly, Peedikayil et al. (2023) believe that sustainability should be embedded in all subject areas and be able to drive the whole-school transformation. In Pakistan, Saqib et al. (2020) also found that institutional commitment and curriculum integration are key to strengthen sustainability education within the country. Hence, it is necessary to have comprehensive institutional policies that institutionalise ESD as a priority in education that is monitored, resourced and led by commitment.

Theme 10: Long-term plan for policy support to achieve sustainable ESD

The study also identified that supportive policies in the education sector, ongoing professional development, lesser administrative burden and institutional support are necessary for long-term sustainability. Participants acknowledged that a number of ESD programmes went beyond the Connecting Classrooms Programme as they were integrated into the day-to-day school life including environmental awareness activities, recycling programs, and community engagement. But larger international collaborations were harder to maintain as they required external funding, expertise, and coordination. Participants thus suggested long-term planning, more support from the government, a structured course of teacher professional development, and, less documentation requirements to improve future implementation.

One coordinator observed:

“Long term involvement of the projects would make a more positive impact.” (C-1)

Likewise, a teacher commented:

“It would be more sustainable if there were long-term planning and assistance.” (T-2)

These results, however, indicate that there is a need for reforms in the policy beyond what can be achieved at a single school level to ensure sustainable ESD. Long-term implementation requires collaboration between schools, educational authorities, the policy maker and external partners to ensure adequate resources, professional learning opportunities and institutional supports. UNESCO (2020) also stresses the need for coherent national policies, including whole-school approaches and long-term capacity building in order to implement ESD. Holst et al. (2024) also claim that sustainability becomes embedded when educational institutions embed it within their concept of leadership, curriculum, operations, and community partnerships. Furthermore, Purwianingsih et al. (2022) emphasize that continuous professional development helps teachers acquire skills in implementing sustainability concepts in their classes effectively. Based on these insights, it can be concluded that there is need to improve the policy commitment, increase the institutional structures for continuous improvement rather than for short-run project implementation, sustainable funding

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mechanisms and to reduce the administrative burden for the future implementation of ESD in Pakistani private schools.

The results showed that there is a need for comprehensive institutional and policy changes to strengthen and sustain ESD in private secondary schools overall. The school should work towards distributed leadership, participatory decision making, formal integration of the curriculum, ongoing teacher professional learning and institutional planning. Moreover, minimizing documentation, and augmenting professional trust, would allow teachers to focus on meaningful learning and innovation. In policy terms, increased school, EA and national stakeholder working together is needed to ensure consistent guidance, resources and monitoring. If these changes can be put in place, ESD will become an integrated and sustainable part of the school leadership, teaching and organisational culture, thereby ensuring its long-term impact in Pakistani schools.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that school leadership plays a vital role in implementing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in secondary schools in Karachi. The British Council's Connecting Classrooms programme supported schools in integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), international collaboration, and sustainability into teaching and learning. The study found that collaborative and distributed leadership approaches were particularly effective in promoting ESD. Other factors required for successful implementation included curriculum integration, teacher professional development, international partnerships, sufficient resources, monitoring and institutional support. These are the areas that can be strengthened to help schools become responsible and active citizens who can contribute to resolving the problems of sustainability.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

School leaders should set a vision for ESD and embed the vision in school policies and practices. The curriculum needs to be in line with UNESCO's ESD framework, as well as covering topics of sustainability in the local context. Teachers should integrate ESD and SDGs within the regular school curriculum by making links with the subjects taught. Practical guidelines and institutional support by policymakers for better implementation of ESD in secondary schools. More research is needed on ESD leadership in other educational contexts with larger samples across districts, provinces, and school systems to further enrich the generalizability.



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