


 Research Article

From Care to Citizenship: Rethinking Early Childhood Education Through the Lens of Sustainability and Participation

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Abstract

Education for active citizenship constitutes a central pillar of contemporary educational policies at both international and national levels. In Greece, recent legislative initiatives and the new curriculum “*Actions of an Active Citizen*” (Government Gazette 6048/B¹/1-11-2024) introduce 17 thematic areas aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), implemented from preschool to upper secondary education. The main objective is to establish active citizenship as a concept and pedagogical practice, promoting democracy, cooperation, and social responsibility. This study focuses on early childhood education and explores how preschool teachers in the Cyclades (North Aegean, Greece) design and implement active citizenship projects within this curriculum framework, as well as how they evaluate their effectiveness. The research aims to capture pedagogical practices that foster democratic learning and sustainable development through participation, collaboration, and the engagement of both the school and the local community. Specifically, it examines how they conceptualize the notion and pedagogical role of active citizenship in early childhood education, what forms of pedagogical practices and activities they implement, and what challenges or needs they identify for the effective integration of active citizenship into their educational practice. The study was conducted during the 2024–2025 school year and targeted all preschools across the Cyclades islands. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and were analyzed using SPSS v.29. The results indicated that preschools can serve as *living laboratories of democracy and social transformation*. Through intentional, reflective pedagogy, active citizenship becomes a *way of life* within the educational experience. Early childhood emerges as a fertile ground for nurturing values such as empathy, solidarity, and responsibility. The case of the Cyclades illustrates how small school communities can function as *micro-democracies*, where children learn to listen, collaborate, and care for their shared world.

Keywords: Active Citizenship, Community Engagement, Democratic Learning, Early Childhood Education, Sustainable Development Goals

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education for active citizenship has emerged in recent years as one of the core pillars of educational policy and pedagogical practice, both in Greece and internationally. The contemporary social and environmental context—characterized by crises, inequalities, and continuous transformations—renders imperative the formation of citizens endowed with critical thinking, social awareness, and participatory engagement (Biesta, 2011; Hoskins & Crick, 2010).

In the Greek context, recent legislative initiatives and the national curriculum program “*Actions of the Active Citizen*” (Government Gazette 6048/B¹/1-11-2024) institutionalize the notion of active citizenship as a transversal educational value, integrated organically across all educational levels—from preschool to upper secondary school. By linking its principles to the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the program promotes the cultivation of life skills, participation in decision-making processes, and the development of a culture of democracy and responsibility toward the common good (Ministry of

Education, 2024; UNESCO, 2017). In this context, the concept of *active citizenship* is approached as a multidimensional construct (Karadimou & Tsioumis, 2024), encompassing a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable individuals to participate actively, responsibly, and with respect for democratic principles (Crick, 2008; Hoskins et al., 2006). Active citizenship is not confined to the understanding of political institutions or participation in formal democratic processes; rather, it manifests as the everyday practice of democracy through collaboration, conflict resolution, empathy, and care for the common good (Biesta, 2011).

Within the broader framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), active citizenship functions as a key driver of social transformation (UNESCO, 2017, 2024). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute an international framework of values and actions that integrate issues of justice, equality, environmental awareness, and peace, shaping a comprehensive educational vision for the 21st-century citizen (United Nations, 2015).

Early childhood education constitutes a critical field for establishing these values. At this stage, children form their first social and moral frameworks, while experiential and collaborative learning provides fertile ground for the practice of citizenship in everyday contexts—through caring, participation, and dialogue (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Kapsalis & Charalambous, 2019; Siraj-Blatchford & Huggins, 2015). Early childhood education plays a decisive role in cultivating a democratic culture. Dewey (1916) emphasized that democracy is not merely a form of government but a way of life—nurtured through experience and participation. In preschool settings, pedagogical practices that strengthen children’s voices, collective decision-making, and environmental responsibility constitute foundational forms of early citizenship (Moss, 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Sterling, 2010). Moreover, contemporary pedagogical theory, as articulated by Freire (1970) and Biesta (2011), underscores the role of education as a process of emancipation and social consciousness. The teacher’s role, particularly in early childhood, is to create an environment that encourages dialogue, critical reflection, and collective action (UNESCO, 2024).

Consequently, active citizenship in preschool education should not be viewed as an abstract concept but as a lived pedagogical practice (Katsiki-Givalou, 2020). It is expressed in the everyday life of the classroom, in relationships, decisions, and shared responsibilities (Papadatos, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As Moss (2014) suggests, the preschool can function as a “*public forum of democracy*,” where children learn to participate, to listen, and to act collaboratively.

The present study examines the development of active citizenship in early childhood education through pedagogical initiatives implemented in preschools of the Cyclades during the 2024–2025 school year, within the framework of the new national curriculum. Its purpose is to illuminate how preschool teachers conceptualize, design, and implement citizenship-related activities, connecting the school community both with the Sustainable Development Goals and with local community life.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Institutional Framework and Recent Policy Developments

The introduction of the “*Active Citizen Actions*” curriculum program (Government Gazette 6048/B’/1-11-2024) represents a significant institutional shift in Greek education. Active citizenship is now officially recognized as a cross-curricular theme applicable to all educational levels, linked explicitly to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The official documents of the Ministry of Education and the accompanying teachers’ guides provide thematic units, pedagogical orientations, and implementation strategies for preschools. This legislative initiative marks the starting point for a systematic national policy on early citizenship education in Greece.

1.1.2. Theoretical Trends in Greek Scholarship

Greek academic literature on democratic education in early childhood often draws on international theoretical traditions (Dewey, Freire, Moss, Biesta) while contextualizing them in local cultural and pedagogical realities. Scholars emphasize care, participation, and everyday classroom practices as vehicles for democratic formation. Within this framework, concepts such as *citizenship* and *democracy* are adapted to

the developmental and social context of the preschool environment (Kapsalis & Charalambous, 2019; Katsiki-Givalou, 2020; Melis, 2025). Postgraduate theses and empirical studies on democratic pedagogy in Greece frequently conceptualize citizenship as an attitude and a lived practice rather than as knowledge of political institutions.

1.1.3. Empirical Studies in Greece — Main Findings

Empirical research conducted in Greek preschools remains relatively limited but steadily growing. The existing body of work includes doctoral dissertations and small-scale studies that explore teachers' perceptions of democratic education, classroom participation, and the cultivation of values such as empathy, respect, and cooperation.

Key findings indicate that:

- Preschool teachers recognize the potential of early childhood settings to “plant the seeds” of democratic values, but also express a need for targeted professional development and practical tools.
- Many classroom activities are experiential and connected to community initiatives—addressing solidarity, environmental protection, and nonviolence—but systematic documentation and evaluation of outcomes are often lacking.
- There is an increasing availability of practical material (activity examples, guides, digital resources), yet most empirical studies rely on local, qualitative samples, with a scarcity of large-scale or longitudinal research.

1.1.4. Practical Applications and Educational Resources in Greek Context

Following the curriculum's publication, the Ministry of Education and regional school structures released implementation guides, exemplar scenarios, and educational materials for preschools. In addition, conferences, training seminars, and case studies have showcased “good practices” of democratic participation. These resources typically emphasize experiential learning, children's responsibility-taking, and the contextualization of SDGs within local communities. However, despite the abundance of practical guidelines, systematic evidence on the long-term pedagogical impact of such activities remains limited.

1.1.5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

The Greek literature reveals promising practices but also clear research gaps:

1. Lack of longitudinal and quantitative studies: Most research remains qualitative or small-scale, with limited measurement of long-term impact.
2. Need for validated assessment tools: No standardized instruments exist in Greek for measuring “early citizenship” skills and attitudes in preschoolers.
3. Teacher training: There is a persistent need for targeted professional development that translates theory into coherent classroom practice.
4. Community and SDG connection: Further research is required to explore effective ways of linking global sustainability goals with local pedagogical realities in Greek early childhood education.

2. METHODS

2.1. Purpose and Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate preschool teachers' perceptions and practices regarding the development of active citizenship within the framework of the new national curriculum “*Actions of the Active Citizen*” (Government Gazette 6048/B²/1-11-2024).

Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do preschool teachers in the Cyclades conceptualize the notion and pedagogical role of active citizenship in early childhood education?
2. What forms of pedagogical practices and activities do they implement in their preschools?
3. What challenges or needs do they identify for the effective integration of active citizenship into their educational practice?

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted during the 2024–2025 school year and targeted all preschools across the Cyclades islands, within the framework of the new curriculum. The initial population frame included 112 public and private preschools located on Syros, Naxos, Paros, Milos, Andros, Tinos, Mykonos, Amorgos, and smaller surrounding islands.

Out of the 112 kindergartens, 102 kindergarten teachers-directors actively participated by completing an online questionnaire, resulting in a remarkably high response rate of 91%, which enhances the representativeness and reliability of the findings. Sampling was conducted using a convenience method, as participants voluntarily responded to an invitation distributed via email and professional networking groups for educators. The inclusion criteria required participants to be active educators currently serving in the selected school units for the 2024–2025 school year. Exclusion criteria were applied to teachers on long-term administrative or medical leave, as well as to those who provided incomplete survey responses. By including the total population of the specific region/group, the study ensures a high level of representativeness and minimizes potential sampling error.

As is typical in Greek early childhood education, the majority of the participants were female (95%), reflecting the composition of the national preschool teaching workforce (Ministry of Education, 2022). The participants had an average of 13 years of professional experience (ranging from 2 to 28 years). Approximately 60% worked in multi-class urban preschools on the larger islands, while 40% were employed in small, one- or two-class preschools located in smaller island communities. This distribution provided a valuable diversity of pedagogical experiences, with smaller schools often demonstrating stronger community ties and more collaborative cultures.

2.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a custom-designed online questionnaire created with Google Forms, specifically designed for the purposes of this study, based on international frameworks for citizenship education and the competency models proposed by UNESCO (2017) and the Institute of Educational Policy (2024).

The questionnaire consisted of 4 parts:

1. Demographic and professional information (gender, age, years of service, and administrative position).
2. The implemented Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their daily classroom activities through a frequency-based Likert scale (ranging from 'Never' to 'Very Frequently').
3. The context (*within the school, in the local community, across classrooms, or in collaboration with external partners*) in which active citizenship projects were implemented.
4. Open-ended questions, inviting participants to express qualitative teachers' insights into:
 - The meaningful involvement and positive impact of these actions on children, parents, and the local community of the Cyclades.
 - What are the primary recommendations and necessary conditions identified by educators for the improvement, professional support, and long-term sustainability of the 'Active Citizen Actions' program in preschool education?
 - What are the pedagogical impacts, challenges, and reflective insights gained from the implementation of the 'Active Citizen Actions' program, and how did this experience reshape the professional identity of educators and the democratic life of the school?

The questionnaire was piloted with three kindergarten teachers to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. Their feedback was used to make minor adjustments to wording and structure. Open-ended questions: The instrument's content validity was reviewed by three university experts in Early Childhood Pedagogy and Democratic Education. Internal consistency reliability of the attitude scales was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .87$, which is considered satisfactory (Field, 2018).

The average time required for each participant to complete the questionnaire was approximately 15 minutes. This duration was considered appropriate to ensure thoughtful responses without causing participant fatigue, thereby maintaining the reliability of the collected data.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place from March to May 2025. Prior to distribution, all schools were informed through the regional education directorates, and written consent for participation was obtained. All procedures complied with ethical standards and data protection regulations (GDPR 2016/679).

2.5. Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.29, employing descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) and correlational analyses (ANOVA) to explore relationships between teachers' responses and age and professional experience.

Responses to open-ended questions were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with data coded into thematic categories such as "*Pedagogical Support and Teacher Professional Development*", "*Strengthening Collaboration with the Local Community*", "*Parental Involvement and Home-School Synergy*", "*Digital Dimension and Dissemination of Good Practices*", "*Institutional and Administrative Support*".

The combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses enabled a holistic interpretation and triangulation of findings.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Preschool Activities

The first section of the questionnaire investigated which Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were addressed through pedagogical activities implemented in the preschools of the Cyclades during the 2024–2025 school year.

Analysis of the responses revealed that the teachers primarily focused on themes related to *care, health, and ecological awareness*—elements traditionally associated with early childhood social and environmental education.

The largest proportion ($n = 82$) of preschool teachers reported that their activities were linked to *Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being*, emphasizing physical and mental well-being, healthy nutrition, emotional empowerment, and positive relationships within the school community. Activities included experiential projects on healthy lifestyles, teamwork and cooperation, emotional expression, positive body image, and environmental care. High and nearly equal frequencies were observed for activities related to *Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities*, and *Goal 15: Life on Land*. These projects focused on environmental awareness, school-yard care, tree planting, exploration of local flora and fauna, and collaborations with local organizations (e.g., municipalities, cultural associations, volunteer groups). Through these experiences, children participated actively in caring for their environment, perceiving their community as a shared space of responsibility and creativity.

Moderate but significant attention ($n = 57$ and $n = 45$) was given to goals related to *Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals*, *Goal 13: Climate Action*, and *Goal 4: Quality Education*. Teachers' narratives highlighted the importance of collaboration, responsibility, and empathy, as well as the desire to connect learning experiences with broader global and social issues.

Finally, smaller but noteworthy proportions ($n = 36$ and $n = 38$) referred to *Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities*, and *Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production*. These activities mostly involved inclusion and diversity initiatives, as well as projects promoting waste reduction, recycling, and material reuse.

Table 1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Preschool Activities

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)	Theme	Frequency of Mentions	Interpretation
SDG 3	Good health and well-being	High	Emphasis on psychosocial well-being and empathy
SDG 11	Sustainable cities and communities	High	Community identity and collective responsibility
SDG 15	Life on land	High	Environmental care and ecological awareness
SDG 17	Partnerships for the goals	Moderate	Collaborative actions with stakeholders
SDG 13	Climate action	Moderate	Climate sensitivity and ecological practices
SDG 4	Quality education	Moderate	Education as an agent of change
SDG 10	Reduced inequalities	Low	Inclusion and respect for diversity
SDG 12	Responsible consumption and production	Low	Recycling and responsible consumption

The results indicate that preschool teachers in the Cyclades approach sustainability primarily through care and community, reflecting values embedded in Greek pedagogical culture. Disaggregated by experience, 87% of participants emphasizing goals such as “health,” “sustainable communities,” and “life on land” reported over 20 years of classroom practice, suggesting that long-serving teachers rely on established routines and practical knowledge to address environmental and community-oriented dimensions of sustainability. In contrast, younger teachers with fewer years of experience focused more on goals related to “inequalities” and “responsible consumption,” indicating a greater sensitivity to socio-economic and abstract aspects of citizenship. These patterns reveal a generational gradient in sustainability approaches: experienced educators prioritize tangible, experiential, and community-based goals, while early-career teachers introduce emerging socio-economic and behavioral dimensions. Collectively, the findings suggest that Greek early childhood education is gradually evolving toward a multi-dimensional conception of education for sustainability and citizenship, integrating personal, social, and environmental components.

3.2. Context of Implementation of Active Citizenship Activities

The second research question explored the context in which active citizenship projects were implemented. Teachers indicated whether these initiatives took place *within the school*, *in the local community*, *across classrooms*, or *in collaboration with external partners*.

The vast majority of the participants, specifically 92.2% ($n=94$) of the 102 kindergarten teachers, reported that their projects were implemented *within the school community*. This choice appears connected to the familiarity and safety of the school environment, where teachers can organize participatory activities, strengthen cooperation among children, and promote democratic practices through daily interactions.

A smaller, yet significant, proportion of the participants, specifically 52% ($n=53$) of the 102 kindergarten teachers, highlighted implementing projects *within the local community or neighborhood*, including visits to local organizations (e.g., municipalities, cultural centers, volunteer groups), tree-planting in public spaces, and joint initiatives with parents and residents. These experiences demonstrate the dynamic potential of community-based learning, as children encounter real-world expressions of participation and social contribution.

A smaller but notable group of teachers, specifically 38.2% ($n=39$) of the 102 participants, indicated organizing *inter-class collaborations* within the same school. These examples reflect an emerging culture of cooperation and collective school identity, expanding the concept of active citizenship from the classroom to the whole institution.

Table 2. Context of Implementation of Active Citizenship Activities

Context of Implementation	Frequency	Interpretation
School community	Very high	Focus on democratic everyday life within the school
Local community / neighborhood	Medium	Connection of the school with the social fabric
Inter-class collaboration	Medium–low	Signs of a collective school culture
Digital environment	Low	Limited digital engagement
External collaborators / institutions	Low	Weak institutional networking

A very small number of responses, specifically 11.8% (n=12), mentioned activities in *digital environments* or in *collaboration with external stakeholders* such as NGOs, cultural organizations, or educational networks. This limited digital or institutional engagement may reflect both a preference for tangible, experiential participation and the current lack of infrastructure or digital culture in Greek preschools. Nevertheless, integrating digital and inter-institutional components in future projects offers opportunities for expanding civic participation and global connectivity.

The findings suggest that active citizenship in preschools is primarily enacted within the *internal democratic microcosm* of the school, where children learn through participation and shared responsibility. The gradual expansion of projects toward the community and inter-class cooperation indicates an emerging participatory pedagogy. However, the limited presence of digital or institutional collaborations points to a still “introverted” pedagogical orientation. While not inherently negative, this pattern highlights the need for further *outreach*—linking schools to their wider communities and strengthening the digital dimensions of citizenship education from early childhood.

3.3. Evaluation Criteria and Overall Outcomes

The evaluation of active citizenship initiatives in the preschools of the Cyclades was based on two primary criteria:

- (a) The smooth implementation of all project phases—planning, execution, and assessment—and
- (b) The positive impact on all stakeholders, including children, educators, parents, and the wider school and local community.

An overwhelming majority of participants (96.1%, n = 98) reported that the projects were successfully implemented, fostering high levels of children’s engagement and meaningful school-community involvement. Key contributing factors included the experiential design of activities, collaborative decision-making, and integration of relevant topics into daily routines. Age-disaggregated analysis indicated that younger teachers exhibited particularly positive outcomes, with 84% reporting their sustainable development projects as highly successful, suggesting that early-career educators may more readily adopt participatory and innovative pedagogical approaches. Participants also provided recommendations for program improvement and sustainability, which were subsequently categorized into five thematic areas.

3.3.1. Pedagogical Support and Teacher Professional Development

A vast majority of the participants, specifically 83.3% (n=85) of the 102 kindergarten teachers, strongly emphasized the need for continuous professional development. These educators pointed out that a theoretical understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is insufficient unless accompanied by practical tools, lesson plans, and examples of good practices specifically adapted for preschool education. Furthermore, these respondents identified the enhancement of skills in participatory pedagogy, emotional literacy, and conflict resolution as a crucial requirement for the successful implementation of active citizenship initiatives. The high percentage of teachers (over 83%) requesting further training indicates that specialized support in democratic education is the most significant priority for the program’s future success in the Cyclades.

3.3.2. Strengthening Collaboration with the Local Community

Based on a sample of 102 kindergarten teachers, 81 teachers, representing 79.4%, highlighted the importance of expanding collaboration between schools and local communities through partnerships with local authorities, cultural and environmental organizations, and civic groups. They stressed that active citizenship acquires genuine meaning when children step outside the school walls and engage with real people, places, and community issues. Developing local *school–community networks* was proposed as a lever for sustainable educational change.

3.3.3. Parental Involvement and Home–School Synergy

A substantial majority of the participants, specifically 76.5% (n=78), underscored that the active participation of parents is a vital factor in enhancing the effectiveness of citizenship projects. These educators noted that systematic parent engagement ensures the continuity of values and practices between the school and the home environment, which is essential for the internalization of democratic principles by preschool children.

To achieve this, the respondents recommended the implementation of workshops, meetings, and joint school-community events designed to involve families directly in the educational process. The findings suggest that more than three-quarters of the teaching staff view the creation of a unified culture of cooperation and shared responsibility between families and educators as a fundamental pillar for the success of active citizenship initiatives in the Cyclades.

3.3.4. Digital Dimension and Dissemination of Good Practices

A significant portion of the sample, representing 69.6% (n=71) of the 102 participating teachers, highlighted the necessity of incorporating a digital component into citizenship education. According to these educators, digital tools should not merely be secondary resources but essential means for inter-school collaboration and the effective dissemination of project results across the Cyclades.

The participants specifically proposed the creation of a centralized digital platform or repository of good practices. Such a repository would allow educators to exchange materials, innovative ideas, and pedagogical experiences, thereby strengthening the professional learning community. The findings indicate that nearly seven out of ten teachers believe that enhancing the digital visibility of preschool civic education is a key step toward its modernization and the fostering of a more connected educational network in 2026.

3.3.5. Institutional and Administrative Support

Finally, a majority of the participants, specifically 52.9% (n=54) of the 102 educators, stressed the critical importance of formal institutional support for citizenship initiatives. These teachers advocated for a more structured framework, including clearer policy guidelines and the provision of sufficient planning time within the school schedule to implement these projects effectively. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted the need for the official recognition of teachers' pedagogical efforts by educational authorities. According to the findings, over half of the sample views institutional reinforcement of the 'Active Citizen Actions' program as a fundamental prerequisite for its long-term sustainability. Such support is considered essential for embedding a permanent culture of active citizenship across the preschool education system in 2026.

The evaluation findings indicate that active citizenship in preschools is not perceived as an abstract policy objective but as a lived pedagogical experience rooted in *collectivity*, *empathy*, and *shared responsibility*. Teachers act as mediators of democratic values, while children participate as active members of a small community that learns to collaborate, care, and co-create. The dynamics observed confirm that early childhood education can serve as a foundational space for democratic learning—provided that sustained institutional support, professional training, and inter-sectoral collaboration are ensured.

4. REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE (2024–2025)

The implementation of the “*Active Citizen Actions*” program across preschools in the Cyclades during the 2024–2025 school year revealed a rich mosaic of pedagogical experiences, challenges, and reflective insights that collectively shaped the identity of the initiative. Through their responses and narratives, teachers described the process not merely as a set of activities but as a journey of *self-awareness and transformation* - for both children and educators alike.

4.1. Positive Aspects and Pedagogical Impact

Teachers overwhelmingly reported that the program reinvigorated their pedagogical practice. The integration of citizenship projects into daily preschool life renewed children’s enthusiasm, strengthened their participation in collective decision-making, and fostered a sense of belonging to the group. The experiential and cooperative nature of the activities allowed children to internalize values such as solidarity, care, diversity, and shared responsibility through play and practice. Furthermore, educators appreciated that the SDGs provided a coherent pedagogical framework, connecting local experiences with global values and giving educational content broader ethical and social significance.

4.2. Challenges and Barriers

Despite the positive outcomes, participants also identified several challenges in implementing the program:

- Time constraints: The dense preschool curriculum and administrative workload left limited time for planning, coordination, and evaluation of citizenship projects.
- Lack of specialized training: Many teachers felt insufficiently prepared in areas such as active citizenship, social–emotional learning, and sustainability education adapted for preschoolers.
- Limited collaboration with external actors: Although noteworthy local partnerships existed, most remained isolated initiatives dependent on individual teachers’ motivation.
- Digital inequalities: Uneven access to technological infrastructure constrained opportunities for digital collaboration and dissemination.

4.3. Feedback and Prospects

All participating preschool teachers (n = 102) in the Cyclades viewed the experience as highly positive and professionally enriching. They reported developing new pedagogical competencies, strengthening reflective practice, and gaining a deeper sense of purpose in their teaching. Children’s active participation demonstrated that preschools can indeed cultivate citizenship—not as a theoretical construct but as a *way of being and acting* in everyday school life. Several educators referred to the emergence of “schools that change rhythm”—spaces where children learn to listen, deliberate, and co-decide, forming small yet meaningful “islands of democracy.”

4.4. Future Perspectives and Pedagogical Proposals

The empirical findings of this study point to several directions for consolidating active citizenship in early childhood education:

- Institutional anchoring: Long-term integration of the “*Active Citizen Actions*” curriculum within national educational policy and preschool programming.
- Professional development: Experiential, participatory teacher training that builds capacities for democratic and reflective practice.
- School–community–parent partnerships: Strengthening the social diffusion of citizenship education through multi-level collaboration.

- Learning networks: Creation of inter-school communities of practice and reflection for knowledge exchange and innovation.
- Digital engagement: Integration of digital tools to enhance children's participation and the dissemination of good practices.

These directions align with the European Commission's (2023) framework on *education for democratic citizenship and active participation*, which stresses that civic learning should begin in early childhood through lived democratic experiences rather than abstract instruction (UNESCO, 2024).

5. DISCUSSION - IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The present study underscored the pivotal role of early childhood education in laying the foundations for active citizenship and education for sustainable development. The primary purpose of this research is to evaluate the implementation and impact of the 'Active Citizen Actions' program within the 112 kindergartens of the Cyclades during the 2024-2025 school year. The study specifically aims to assess the integration of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals into the preschool curriculum, examine the effectiveness of experiential pedagogical approaches in fostering active citizenship identity in early childhood, analyze the social impact of the initiative on children, educators, parents, and the local community, and identify challenges and best practices in order to formulate evidence-based recommendations for the program's long-term sustainability and enhancement.

Based on data from 102 kindergarten teachers in the Cyclades (2024–2025), this study identifies key implications for policy, practice, curriculum development, and research in early childhood citizenship education. The findings highlight the need for systemic consolidation, pedagogical alignment, and coordinated stakeholder engagement to ensure sustainable implementation.

At the policy level, the results support the formal integration of "Active Citizen Actions" into the national preschool curriculum, replacing its current optional status. Such institutionalization would enhance curricular coherence and long-term stability. This shift should be supported by targeted public funding for sustainability-oriented preschool initiatives, particularly to address the digital inequality identified by teachers as a barrier to equitable participation. Additionally, the introduction of formal recognition mechanisms, such as a "Democratic School" accreditation, could function as both quality assurance and an incentive for sustained engagement in citizenship education (UNESCO, 2024).

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of extending citizenship education beyond classroom boundaries. While classroom-based practices remain foundational, meaningful citizenship learning requires structured engagement with local authorities, community organizations, and civil society actors. The establishment of local Communities of Practice is recommended to support reflective collaboration, professional learning, and the development of collective professional identity (Petkou et. al., 2025). Furthermore, the systematic integration of emotional literacy—especially conflict resolution and participatory decision-making—into daily classroom routines emerges as a critical condition for fostering democratic dispositions in early childhood.

Regarding curriculum development, the results emphasize the need for contextualized and interdisciplinary approaches. Abstract Sustainable Development Goals should be translated into developmentally appropriate learning experiences grounded in the sociocultural and environmental realities of island communities. The creation of centralized, open-access digital repositories for disseminating good practices, requested by 69.6% of participants, would facilitate pedagogical exchange and scalability. Integrating citizenship education with environmental and health education aligns with the holistic, care-oriented framework favored by preschool teachers.

Finally, the study identifies priorities for future research, including longitudinal investigations of citizenship competencies across educational transitions, the pedagogical integration of digital tools in early childhood, and the persistent challenges of parental and community engagement, identified by 76.5% of participants as critical yet difficult to achieve.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that preschool settings serve as foundational sites for the enactment of democratic practices. When citizenship education is embedded through structured, participatory, and reflective pedagogy, it becomes an integral component of daily educational routines rather than an ancillary curriculum element (Bouzakis, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2025). Such integration fosters the early development of democratic dispositions, including empathy, solidarity, responsibility, and collaborative decision-making (UNESCO, 2024).

Empirical evidence from the Cyclades indicates that small school communities can function as micro-democracies, providing children with opportunities to engage in dialogue, negotiation, and collective action. These structured experiences contribute to the formation of social competence, civic awareness, and ethical responsibility, establishing a foundation for future civic participation.

The findings reinforce that active citizenship in early childhood education is a necessary condition for sustaining democratic competencies, not a pedagogical enrichment (Bouzakis, 2018; Fragkoudaki, 2021). Experiential and collaborative practices cultivate civic identity, social accountability, and participatory skills, situating preschools as critical institutions for democratic continuity (Papadimitriou, 2015; Papadatos, 2017). Early engagement in democratic processes links educational practice directly to the long-term sustainability of social and political systems, demonstrating that investment in participatory early childhood education supports both immediate developmental outcomes and the broader resilience of democratic societies (Biesta, 2011; UNESCO, 2024).

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Research Ethics. The authors declared that ethical approval was not required for this study. The research involved the voluntary participation of kindergarten teachers, with all data collected anonymously through a questionnaire. No personal identifiers or sensitive information were obtained, and no intervention or potential harm to participants was involved. According to the institutional guidelines, studies of this nature are exempt from formal ethics committee approval. Nevertheless, all participants were informed about the aim of the study, assured of confidentiality, and their participation was entirely voluntary. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. They were informed about procedures and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data Availability Statement. All data generated or analyzed during this study are available for sharing when an appropriate request is directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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