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School Leadership in Global Citizenship Education: Strategies, Roles, and Policy Innovations for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract. Global Citizenship Education (GCED) plays a vital role in cultivating socially responsible and globally aware learners. However, implementation methods vary widely among school leaders, particularly where national policies require local adaptation. Although the Department of Education in the Philippines has integrated GCED within the K-12 curriculum through national initiatives, provincial implementation requires contextual adaptation. This study explored the perceptions of 13 purposively selected school principals regarding their roles in promoting GCED and in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals. The study was conducted in Surigao del Sur, Philippines, a predominantly rural province where schools serve diverse communities with limited technological resources. Using a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis across elementary, secondary, and integrated schools, the findings revealed that while school leaders recognize the value of GCED in developing globally competent students, they face significant barriers, including limited resources, inadequate training, and absent policy frameworks. Principals conceptualized GCED variably, from civic responsibility to social justice paradigms while identifying multidimensional roles in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through educational leadership, community advocacy, and environmental stewardship. To address these challenges, this study introduces the Leadership-Driven GCED Implementation Framework, emphasizing three interrelated pillars: Visionary Leadership, Strategic Implementation, and Community-Policy Engagement. leveraging offers practical, cost-effective strategies for institutionalizing GCED through subject integration, partnership leveraging, and technology integration within existing budgetary constraints, transforming policy innovation challenges into actionable solutions for resource-constrained contexts.

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1. Introduction

In response to the increasing global recognition and urgency presented by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) has truly emerged as a critical educational priority designed to equip learners with the essential competencies needed to tackle a multitude of complex global challenges (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2022; Bosio, 2021; Leite, 2022). Furthermore, GCED significantly fosters human rights, social justice, cultural understanding, and sustainability values, all of which are essential in effectively addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in regard to advancing quality education (SDG 4) (Kenny, 2024; Singh et al., 2024).

As key figures in shaping educational environments and learning atmospheres, school leaders undoubtedly play a pivotal role in implementing GCED initiatives, actively influencing curriculum design, school policies, and the pedagogical strategies that are fundamental in preparing students for active and responsible global citizenship (Hameed, 2022). This responsibility demands strategic leadership, exceptional adaptability, and a deep and nuanced understanding of global issues, as school leaders must navigate through diverse institutional, cultural, and policy-related challenges to foster inclusive and sustainable educational settings (Persaud & Murphy, 2019).

In the Philippine educational context, the Department of Education (DepEd) has actively integrated GCED within the K-12 curriculum through national policy initiatives that emphasize inclusivity, cultural appreciation, and environmental sustainability as core educational components (DepEd, 2022). The establishment of the GCED Cooperation Center at the Philippine Normal University, supported by UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Center of Education for International Understanding, provides an institutional framework for educator training and curriculum development within the MATATAG curriculum that integrates global citizenship competencies alongside traditional academic objectives (Bunye, 2024).

Despite the increasing emphasis and focus on GCED at a global level, school leaders are still confronted with significant challenges regarding clearly defining and effectively implementing its principles (Parker et al., 2024). In certain contexts, particularly in Oman, principals tend to perceive GCED as an ambiguous concept, often promoting its values unintentionally and inadvertently rather than doing so through structured and organized approaches (Al'Abri et al., 2024). Nevertheless, they do acknowledge their leadership responsibilities in fostering learning environments that are conducive to the development of globally minded citizens.

The broader significance of GCED and its alignment with the SDGs lies in its unique ability to cultivate critical awareness and action-oriented mindsets among students, especially among teacher candidates who ultimately serve as key facilitators in the transmission of these crucial global values (Akçay et al., 2023).

Moreover, effective school leadership stands as a fundamental cornerstone for the successful implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), as it requires visionary leadership, active stakeholder engagement, and a strong commitment to various sustainability initiatives and missions (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; Kwee, 2021; Qablan et al., 2023). The urgency of GCED implementation is significantly heightened by the effects of globalization and the accelerating pace of environmental, economic, and social crises. Global Citizenship Education empowers learners to engage critically with global issues, thereby enabling them to respond effectively to pressing challenges such as climate change, economic disparities, and geopolitical conflicts (Pacho, 2020; Schildhauer et al., 2021).

However, despite its transformative potential, both GCED and ESD often struggle to gain meaningful traction within formal school curricula. This lack of incorporation can largely be attributed to insufficient governmental support, competing educational priorities, and the complexities involved in balancing economic, environmental, and social objectives (Gough, 2018; Mochizuki & Vickers, 2024). This situation powerfully highlights the pressing need for stronger institutional and policy frameworks that can systematically integrate GCED into educational systems across the globe.

Existing research emphasizes significant gaps in school leaders' understanding and implementation of both GCED and ESD. Numerous school administrators tend to interpret ESD through largely environmental and social lenses, often overlooking its crucial economic sustainability dimensions (Mogaji & Newton, 2020). This narrow conceptualization consequently limits the holistic application of GCED, thereby underscoring the need for explicit frameworks and targeted professional development initiatives that would enable school leaders to integrate both GCED and ESD effectively into their school operations.

Furthermore, variations in national education policies, distinct institutional priorities, and market-driven pressures strongly suggest that school leaders must innovate and adapt curriculum models to reflect the ideals of global citizenship together with sustainable development principles better (Hameed, 2022). Within this national framework, the implementation of GCED in Surigao del Sur presents unique contextual challenges since it is a predominantly rural province in northeastern Mindanao where schools serve diverse communities with varying access to technological resources and international exposure.

The province's geographic isolation, cultural diversity, and environmental challenges related to mining and deforestation create a distinctive setting where global citizenship principles must be adapted to address local community needs while advancing broader sustainable development objectives. This study sought to bridge these knowledge gaps by examining how school leaders conceptualize their role in promoting GCED within their institutions and their role in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. By investigating the perspectives and lived experiences of educational leaders, this research provides practical insights into leadership strategies for integrating GCED into educational

frameworks, ultimately strengthening the foundation for future global citizens. Specifically, this study aimed to address the following objectives:

1. Determine the perspectives of school leaders on Global Citizenship Education.
2. Explore how school leaders perceive themselves as global citizens within their educational settings.
3. Identify the roles that students and teachers recognize as significant in contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Leaders in Promoting Global Citizenship Education

School leaders play a pivotal role in embedding the principles of GCE within their institutions, significantly influencing educational practices and student outcomes. Effective leadership is essential for promoting inclusive and equitable quality education, a fundamental goal of SDG4 (Ghamrawi, 2023). To achieve this, leaders must understand sustainable development concepts, transforming school ethos to align with ESD principles (Mogaji & Newton, 2020).

By integrating GCED into their institutional frameworks, school leaders foster critical thinking, ethical engagement, and intercultural competence, enhancing students' awareness of global challenges while empowering them to act as responsible global citizens (Siritheeratharadol et al., 2023). However, the extent to which school leaders fully integrate these principles into policies, pedagogy, and curriculum remains a contentious issue in educational research that requires further exploration into leadership effectiveness and institutional commitment to GCED (Reimers, 2020).

2.2 Leadership Competencies and Emotional Intelligence in Diverse Educational Settings

The effectiveness of school leaders in promoting GCE often relies on emotional intelligence and cross-cultural competency. Leaders with high emotional intelligence cultivate inclusive environments that celebrate diversity, a core component of GCE (Çayak & Eskici, 2021). The ability to align shared educational goals with global citizenship and sustainability initiatives is particularly crucial in multicultural educational settings (Velarde et al., 2020).

Additionally, school leaders must engage in continuous professional development to enhance interpersonal and leadership skills, ensuring that schools remain supportive environments that are conducive to GCE (Noman et al., 2018). Studies suggest that mentorship, collaborative leadership, and participatory decision-making processes play a crucial role in enhancing educational leadership in globalized learning contexts (Awodiji et al., 2023). By adopting adaptive leadership approaches, school leaders better equip themselves and their institutions to respond effectively to evolving global challenges in education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

2.3 Leadership Styles and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals

Strategic leadership styles, particularly instructional and transformational leadership, are vital in implementing GCE and achieving the SDGs. Transformational leadership inspires teachers' commitment to sustainable

educational practices, fostering a shared vision that aligns with global learning goals (Khumalo, 2019). Similarly, instructional leadership promotes professional learning communities and enables educators to integrate GCED into the curriculum effectively (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018).

Comparative studies in diverse regions, including India and Nepal, underscore the direct link between robust leadership practices and improved educational outcomes that are aligned with SDG targets (Narang et al., 2023; Pant, 2023). However, without strong policy frameworks and investment in leadership development, achieving long-term systemic changes in ESD remains a formidable challenge (Reimers, 2020).

2.4 Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

Despite widespread recognition of its importance, the implementation of GCED and ESD in educational settings faces multiple barriers. Institutional constraints, resource limitations, and resistance to change are common challenges that hinder the full realization of GCED principles in schools (Qablan et al., 2023). Additionally, balancing economic, environmental, and social goals within educational systems remains complex, requiring a multidimensional approach to leadership (Gough, 2018).

However, leadership education and continuous development programs offer opportunities to address these challenges by equipping school leaders with the skills needed to adapt to evolving contexts such as the post-digital era (Awodiji et al., 2023). Scholars emphasize the importance of cross-sector collaborations, government support, and international partnerships in ensuring the scalability and sustainability of GCED implementation (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022).

2.5 Broader Implications of Leadership for Educational Sustainability

Leadership education, particularly in higher education settings, is critical in developing leaders who are capable of addressing global challenges. Higher education institutions serve as platforms for promoting SDG-oriented learning, democratic engagement, and global citizenship (LeBlanc & Odegard, 2023). The role of teacher candidates and students in advancing GCED and ESD is equally crucial, as these individuals serve as future advocates for social justice and cultural understanding (Akçay et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the integration of GCED into teacher education programs has been identified as a strategic approach to strengthening global learning competencies across various levels of education (Oxfam International, 2025). By 2030, equipping all learners with the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development through GCED and ESD will be imperative (UNESCO, 2022). However, achieving this vision requires systematic reforms, increased funding, and enhanced institutional collaboration.

2.6 Policy Innovations in Implementation of Global Citizenship Education

Contemporary educational systems have witnessed significant policy innovations in the implementation and mainstreaming of GCED, reflecting a shift from theoretical frameworks toward practical, evidence-based approaches that address diverse national contexts and educational priorities.

Policy innovations in GCED implementation have emerged through comprehensive curriculum framework development that transforms abstract global citizenship principles into measurable educational outcomes (Radhouane & Maleq, 2020), competency-based assessment frameworks that bridge theoretical aspirations with practical implementation (Sun, 2020), and ethical values-based approaches that move beyond neoliberal market-driven principles toward pedagogy that promotes social responsibility and justice (Bosio & Schattle, 2023). Digital transformation has catalyzed innovative policy approaches for GCED delivery, with virtual exchange programs and online dialogue platforms becoming integral components of policy frameworks that enable international collaboration despite geographical constraints (Helm et al., 2024).

These policy innovations demonstrate increasing sophistication in adapting global GCED principles to local contexts while maintaining international coherence. This is evidenced by the Finnish UNESCO Associated Schools Network educators' implementation of GCED within their national curriculum framework (Kasa et al., 2023). The integration of decolonial and critical perspectives represents another important policy innovation, with educational systems incorporating social justice and transformative theories into their GCED frameworks to address historical inequities through systematic curricular reforms (Bosio & Waghid, 2025).

Assessment and monitoring innovations have become central to contemporary GCED policy frameworks, with international assessment systems influencing national policy innovations in measuring global citizenship competencies alongside traditional civic education outcomes (Damiani & Fraillon, 2025). These policy innovations collectively demonstrate the maturation of GCED implementation approaches, moving from isolated pilot programs to systematic integration within national educational frameworks. However, significant challenges remain in translating these innovations into sustained educational transformation, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into GCED leadership, significant gaps remain in understanding how school leaders in different socio-cultural contexts interpret and implement GCED in practice. There is also limited empirical research on the long-term impact of leadership training programs on sustainable education outcomes (Reimers, 2020). Addressing these research gaps is essential for developing more targeted, evidence-based strategies that enable school leaders to embed GCED into national education systems successfully.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of school principals on GCED and their roles in achieving the SDGs. The qualitative approach was selected to capture the nuanced understandings, lived experiences, and contextual factors that influence how educational leaders conceptualize and implement GCED within their institutions (Creswell & Creswell, 2008). This design aligns with the study's objectives by allowing for deep exploration of participants' meanings and interpretations rather than seeking generalized quantitative patterns. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they provide sufficient structure to address the research questions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging themes related to principals' GCED conceptualizations and SDG implementation strategies.

3.2 Participants

The participants comprised 13 school principals from the Department of Education, Division of Surigao del Sur, Philippines. The principals were purposively selected based on their leadership roles and direct involvement in the implementation of educational policy. The sample consisted of 8 female and 5 male principals, with leadership experience ranging from 3 to 18 years ($M=8.4$ years). Participants represented diverse school contexts: 7 elementary schools, 4 secondary schools, and 2 integrated schools, serving student populations ranging from 150 to 800 students across rural ($n=8$) and urban ($n=5$) settings.

The sample size of 13 participants was determined based on the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which considers the study's narrow aim, strong theoretical foundation, high-quality dialogue during interviews, and homogeneous participant characteristics. Guest et al. (2006) suggest that thematic saturation typically occurs within 6–12 interviews in homogeneous samples; our preliminary analysis indicated conceptual saturation was achieved by the 11th interview, with the final two interviews confirming that no new themes had emerged. While representing approximately 25% of the division's school principals, this sample provided sufficient diversity across school types and contexts to capture varied perspectives on GCED implementation within the local educational landscape.

The selection criteria were (a) a minimum of three years of educational leadership experience to ensure sufficient exposure to curriculum implementation processes; and (b) direct involvement in implementing or overseeing educational curricula or initiatives, thus ensuring that the participants possessed relevant knowledge on integrating new educational frameworks such as GCED.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting 15–20 minutes each using an interview guide developed specifically to address the study's three research questions. The interview guide was developed

through a systematic process involving (a) an extensive literature review on GCED and educational leadership; (b) consultation with three education experts familiar with the Philippine context; and (c) pilot testing with two principals not included in the final sample to refine question clarity and sequencing.

The final interview guide contained three main sections that aligned with the research objectives: (a) understanding of GCED concepts and principles; (b) personal and professional experiences as advocates for global citizenship; and (c) perceived roles in contributing to SDG achievement. Probing questions were included to explore specific examples, challenges, and strategies related to GCED implementation.

Prior to each interview, participants received a brief overview of the study's purpose and were given time to ask questions. Interviews were conducted in English, as all participants demonstrated proficiency in academic English through their professional roles. Each interview was audio-recorded with explicit participant consent and transcribed verbatim immediately following collection to ensure accuracy and minimize data loss.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, progressing from data familiarization to theme definition and reporting. The analysis process began with complete transcription of all the interviews, followed by systematic coding using NVivo 12 software for data organization and management.

To ensure coding reliability and analytical rigor, multiple strategies were employed: (1) All transcripts were independently coded by two researchers, achieving an intercoder agreement of 87% using Cohen's kappa coefficient; (2) Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus-building; (3) Member checking was conducted with six participants who reviewed preliminary themes and provided feedback on accuracy and completeness; and (4) An audit trail documenting all analytical decisions was maintained throughout the process.

The thematic analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of code development, theme construction, and refinement. Initial codes were grouped into potential themes, which were then reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure coherent patterns. Final themes were defined and named to capture the essence of the participants' perspectives accurately while addressing the study's research questions. The analytical process was enhanced by regular team meetings in which emerging themes were critically examined and refined to ensure that they represented genuine patterns rather than the researcher's assumptions.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Multiple strategies were implemented to enhance the study's trustworthiness and credibility. Triangulation was achieved through diverse participant perspectives across different school contexts. Prolonged engagement with the research context and thick description of findings provided sufficient detail for readers to assess

transferability. The reflexivity of the research team was maintained through regular debriefings and acknowledgment of potential biases related to their educational backgrounds.

Dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of all methodological decisions and an external audit by an experienced qualitative researcher who was not involved in the data collection. The audit confirmed that analytical procedures were systematic, and conclusions were supported by the data. Confirmability was established through the audit trail and the member checking processes described above.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Education Superintendent and respective school administrators within the Division of Surigao del Sur prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as research participants.

The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and were assured of complete confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants, and identifying information was removed from the transcripts. All data are stored securely in password-protected files that are accessible only to the research team, and these files will be destroyed for five years post-publication in accordance with ethical guidelines.

4. Findings

4.1 First Objective and Research Question

Research Objective 1: Determine the perspectives of school leaders on Global Citizenship Education.

Research Question 1: What is your perspective on Global Citizenship Education, particularly in relation to its relevance and application in today's educational landscape?

4.1.1 Understanding of Global Citizenship Education

Despite rising recognition of GCED, the responses from the various school principals disclosed a wide range of interpretations and understandings, with some viewing it primarily as a framework centered on civic responsibility and others approaching it through the essential lenses of social justice and inclusivity. This noticeable diversity in perspective suggests that GCED currently lacks a universally accepted and agreed-upon definition, consequently leading to inconsistencies and disparities in the methods employed for its implementation within educational institutions. Principal 1 described GCED as follows:

"Global Citizenship Education is a scaffolded approach where students gradually build an awareness of their surroundings and understand the impact of their actions on others."

Principal 5 highlighted the ethical dimension of GCED:

“A key component of the education sector program is GCED. It strives to teach students the moral principles, thinking styles, and conduct that promote responsible global citizenship.”

While GCED was generally acknowledged as vital and important, the myriads of responses extracted a troubling lack of a standardized or commonly accepted framework for its actual implementation. This absence of standardization may ultimately affect the overall effectiveness of GCED initiatives. The diverse interpretations underscore an urgent need for both policymakers and educators to establish collaboratively a shared, coherent, and structured approach that aligns with global educational standards and remains flexible enough to be adapted to various local contexts.

4.1.2 Challenges in Implementing Global Citizenship Education

While school principals largely acknowledged the undeniable value and importance of GCED, they also revealed several formidable challenges that arise during its implementation. These obstacles were particularly evident in areas with limited resources and relating to the complexities of integrating GCED into existing curricula, the pressing need for teacher training, and the infrastructural deficiencies that many schools face.

Principal 3 expressed concerns about educational disparities:

My perspective on global citizenship – it is complicated and hard to achieve because our country, the Philippines, belongs to the Third World ... To achieve this level of education, we need to lift up our technological advancement, provide enough ICT facilities in every school, and revise our education curriculum to align with global standards.

Principal 8 emphasized the need for training and resources:

“To effectively implement GCED, we need more training to capacitate educators so they can augment their teaching skills and integrate global competencies into classroom instruction.”

While logistical barriers such as infrastructural limitations and the need for teacher training were frequently mentioned, a more profound concern emerged regarding whether schools are systemically positioned and prepared to embrace GCED in a complete and meaningful way. Some principals acknowledged the stark reality that without a significant cultural shift in how education itself is perceived, GCED might be at risk of remaining merely an abstract concept rather than evolving into a transformative educational methodology.

4.1.3 Future Aspirations for Global Citizenship Education

Looking toward the future, many principals expressed their aspirations for enhancing GCED through transformative policy changes, thoughtful integration of technology, innovative curriculum development, and establishment of stronger international collaborations.

Principal 7 emphasized the need for continued professional development:

“Provide more training to capacitate the educators in the country to augment their teaching skills with the use of technologies so that they can

hone the heart and mind of every learner into a globally competent individual."

Principal 12 envisioned a more inclusive educational system:

"We need to align our curriculum with global standards while ensuring that cultural diversity and local perspectives are respected."

These insights reveal a compelling suggestion that a proactive, forward-thinking, and collaborative approach is crucial for fully integrating GCED into the educational framework in a sustainable, meaningful, and effective manner.

4.2 Second Objective and Research Question

Research Objective 2: Explore how school leaders perceive themselves as global citizens within their educational settings.

Research Question 2: In the context of your role as a school leader, how do you embody and promote the principles of being a global citizen within your school and community?

4.2.1 Pathways to Becoming a Global Citizen

Principals highlighted multiple approaches for students and educators to cultivate global citizenship, emphasizing broadening perspectives, engaging in intercultural experiences, and fostering critical thinking skills.

Principal 4 suggested the following:

"By investigating social issues with local and worldwide linkages, engaging with other viewpoints, and applying knowledge to actual events, we develop as global citizens."

Principal 9 linked global citizenship with leadership and advocacy:

"First, let's get inspired, broaden our perspectives, travel abroad, become a leader, and plan for our future as a global citizen. To become a global citizen, you'll have to be creative, adaptable, and dedicated."

These findings strongly indicate that both experiential learning and active participation serve as crucial components for nurturing and fostering global citizenship. Schools must strive to provide appropriate platforms that allow students to engage in meaningful international dialogues, participate in global exchange programs, and tackle real-world problem-solving initiatives to build their global competence effectively.

4.2.2 Civic Responsibility and Education

A profound sense of civic duty consistently emerged as a central theme across the discussions, with principals emphasizing the indispensable need for education to instill a strong sense of social responsibility, ethical engagement with diverse communities, and an abiding appreciation for cultural diversity in students.

Principal 6 stated:

"Global citizens recognize and value the fact that we all live in a complex and diverse network of interdependent communities with the right to exist in a just, equal, and healthy world."

Principal 11 added:

“To be a global citizen, there should be respect for human rights and cultural diversity. They are sympathetic to global issues and suffering and feel accountable for their role in causing change.”

These responses collectively reflect a robust commitment toward cultivating civic responsibility through educational initiatives, awareness programs, and targeted community engagement efforts. By diligently embedding civic education into formal school programs, students can be effectively equipped with the core values and competencies needed to make meaningful contributions to society in a thoughtful and responsible manner.

4.3 Third Objective and Research Question

Research Objective 3: Identify the roles that students and teachers recognize as significant in contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Research Question 3: As an educational leader and citizen, what do you consider your vital role in advancing and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda within your school and community?

4.3.1 Educational Leadership and Quality Assurance

Participants consistently emphasized their primary responsibility in ensuring equitable access to quality education, directly addressing the objectives of SDG 4. This commitment manifested through systematic efforts to eliminate educational barriers and promote inclusive learning environments for all students regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

Principal 2 emphasized comprehensive educational provision as follows:

“As a school leader, my utmost support to the Department of Education is providing quality basic education to all learners in my own area of responsibility. I must ensure that all boys and girls shall avail [themselves] of free equitable and quality basic education both in the primary and secondary level to achieve relevant and effective outcomes.”

Principal 7 reinforced this commitment to inclusive education:

“My role is to make sure all students have access to high-quality, inclusive education and encourage possibilities for lifelong learning.”

Principal 8 echoed the sentiments regarding educational accessibility:

“My responsibility is to ensure that all students have access to a rigorous, inclusive education and to provide opportunities for further learning.”

4.3.2 Community Advocacy and Environmental Stewardship

Beyond their institutional roles, principals recognized themselves as community advocates and environmental stewards, actively engaging in broader social and environmental initiatives. This perspective demonstrates their understanding of schools as integral components of larger community ecosystems rather than isolated educational institutions.

Principal 5 articulated a comprehensive approach to community engagement:

“As a citizen, I can play a vital role in realizing the SDGs by using my profession in raising awareness by sharing information within the community, engaging in discussions, and promoting the goals on social media. Become an environmental advocate by promoting policies that support [sic] the protection of the environment, living sustainably, and hold our leaders accountable for implementing policies and actions that support the SDG by voting in elections, participating in advocacy campaigns.”

Principal 12 focused on empowering students for environmental action:

“Empowering our students as future leaders and teachers that they may end poverty in all forms everywhere and take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact.”

4.3.3 Social Justice and Equity Promotion

Participants demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting social justice and addressing various forms of inequality within their educational contexts. Their responses highlighted the interconnected nature of educational leadership and social advocacy, particularly in addressing systemic barriers that prevent equitable access to opportunities.

Principal 1 highlighted gender equality advocacy:

“My role is to become a model to my teachers who eradicate unfairly [sic] treatment. I will use my profession to achieve gender equality in my school.”

Principal 11 addressed health and well-being initiatives:

“I can support efforts to improve health and well-being in my community such as by promoting access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation, or participating in programs that promote mental health and well-being.”

4.3.4 Continuous Professional Development and Global Citizenship

Participants recognized the critical importance of ongoing personal and professional development as essential prerequisites for effectively contributing to SDG achievement. This theme underscores their commitment to lifelong learning and continuous improvement as foundational elements of effective educational leadership in a rapidly changing global context.

Principal 6 emphasized self-development:

“My crucial duty as a citizen in achieving the UN goals is to become one of the citizens who produce top-notch goods, learners, and graduates. To be beneficial for the growth and benefits of everyone, that type of individual should be equipped. Of course, for me to produce a high-quality product, I must first grow personally and professionally by stepping outside of my comfort zone.”

Principal P4 highlighted the attributes needed for global citizenship:

“By promoting development of knowledge, skills, and values to become a global citizen, you will have to be creative, flexible, dedicated, and proactive.”

These findings collectively demonstrate that school principals conceptualize their roles in SDG achievement as multidimensional and interconnected, encompassing educational excellence, community engagement, social justice advocacy, moral leadership, and continuous professional growth. Their perspectives reveal a sophisticated understanding of how educational leadership contributes to broader societal transformation and sustainable development objectives.

5. Discussion

This study examined how 13 school principals in Surigao del Sur, Philippines conceptualize their roles in promoting GCED and contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. The findings revealed that while principals recognize the value of GCED in developing globally competent students, their conceptualizations remain highly variable, ranging from civic responsibility frameworks to social justice paradigms. Participants identified significant implementation barriers, including limited resources, inadequate training, and absent policy frameworks, while recognizing their multidimensional roles in advancing the SDGs through educational leadership, community advocacy, and social justice promotion. These findings illuminate the complex landscape that school leaders navigate in translating global citizenship ideals into practical strategies within resource-constrained contexts.

The findings also revealed that while GCED is gaining substantial recognition in various educational frameworks, its conceptualization among school principals remains inconsistent. This observation aligns with the broader discourse on how GCED is framed within academic and pedagogical discussions, as scholars have debated whether it should be approached exclusively through a skills-based, economic perspective or through a transformative, justice-oriented framework that fosters inclusivity and equity (Al-husban & Al'Abri, 2024; Auh & Kim, 2024).

Some principals in this study wholeheartedly embraced GCED as a civic responsibility initiative, emphasizing the importance of fostering a sense of community and responsibility among students and thus reflecting a more humanistic and ethical perspective on education. Conversely, others viewed GCED primarily as a structural necessity for enhancing global competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world. The absence of a standardized definition and the lack of a structured framework for GCED integration raises significant concerns about the effectiveness and consistency of its implementation in various educational settings globally.

Despite strong advocacy for the principles of GCED, participants expressed a range of concerns regarding the significant challenges associated with its implementation. An identified common barrier was the lack of technological infrastructure and necessary curriculum support, which disproportionately affects schools situated in under-resourced and marginalized regions, making it difficult to promote equitable access to quality education (Judijanto et al., 2024). Additionally, limited professional training opportunities for educators further restrict their ability to integrate GCED principles effectively into everyday

learning environments. These challenges are not unique to the educational landscape in the Philippines; globally, educators grapple with vague policies, insufficient instructional materials, and rigid national curricula that often prioritize standardized testing over fostering holistic global awareness and critical thinking skills (Oxfam International, 2025).

While such structural challenges persist, the findings from this research highlight several key strategies that can facilitate a more effective and meaningful approach to GCED. School principals recognized that experiential learning, intercultural exchanges, and leadership development are essential tools in shaping globally competent and socially responsible students. This perspective aligns closely with prior research that indicates that students engage more deeply and meaningfully with GCED when they are exposed to real-world applications, including international collaborations, community-based projects, and service-learning opportunities that emphasize active participation and reflection (Al-husban & Al'Abri, 2024; Dorji, 2024). However, without comprehensive system-wide reforms, these strategies will likely remain isolated practices that lack institutional support rather than becoming entrenched norms within the educational framework.

The alignment of GCED with the SDGs emerged as a critical and urgent consideration in this study. While many principals expressed a strong commitment to sustainability and equity in their educational goals, their capacity to translate this commitment into actionable and effective policies remains constrained by limited resources, administrative hurdles, and competing institutional priorities. Research suggests that to move towards holistic education, educational systems worldwide must adopt an integrated approach that embeds SDG-aligned learning outcomes within national curricula and educational policies (Reimers, 2020). Without clear governmental support and strategic investment, GCED risks being treated as a supplementary initiative rather than a foundational component of comprehensive education reform.

One of the most compelling themes that emerged from the findings was the moral imperative of civic responsibility and ethical engagement in education. School principals emphasized that beyond the academic curriculum, students must develop a profound sense of global solidarity, empathy, and social justice consciousness. However, for GCED to be truly transformative rather than merely performative, educational institutions must go beyond awareness-raising efforts and actively promote participatory engagement, policy advocacy, and the development of ethical leadership skills among students and educators alike (Choukrani & Ghneim-Herrera, 2025). Without implementing these measures, GCED risks being confined to theoretical discussions and abstract concepts rather than fostering real societal change and impact.

Looking ahead, the findings underscore the urgent and critical need for systemic reform to strengthen the effective implementation of GCED in educational curricula and practices. School leaders acknowledge the importance of aligning their practices with established global-education standards, but without

comprehensive policy-driven strategies, their efforts remain fragmented and lack coherence. Reimers (2020) strongly argues that governments must prioritize the institutionalization of GCED by making strategic investments in training teachers, providing robust curricular support, and fostering meaningful international partnerships. Only through sustained, coordinated efforts at multiple levels can GCED transition from an idealized vision into a transformative educational reality that profoundly shapes the future of education for generations to come.

5.1 Leadership-Driven Implementation of Global Citizenship Education

Given the challenges identified in this study, a structured approach is needed to support school leaders in effectively integrating GCED. The Leadership-Driven GCED Implementation Framework provides a strategic model that addresses policy gaps, resource limitations, and institutional barriers while ensuring sustainable implementation. This framework builds upon leadership theories (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018) and GCED scholarship (Banks, 2004; Reimers, 2020) to bridge the gap between theoretical aspirations and practical execution.

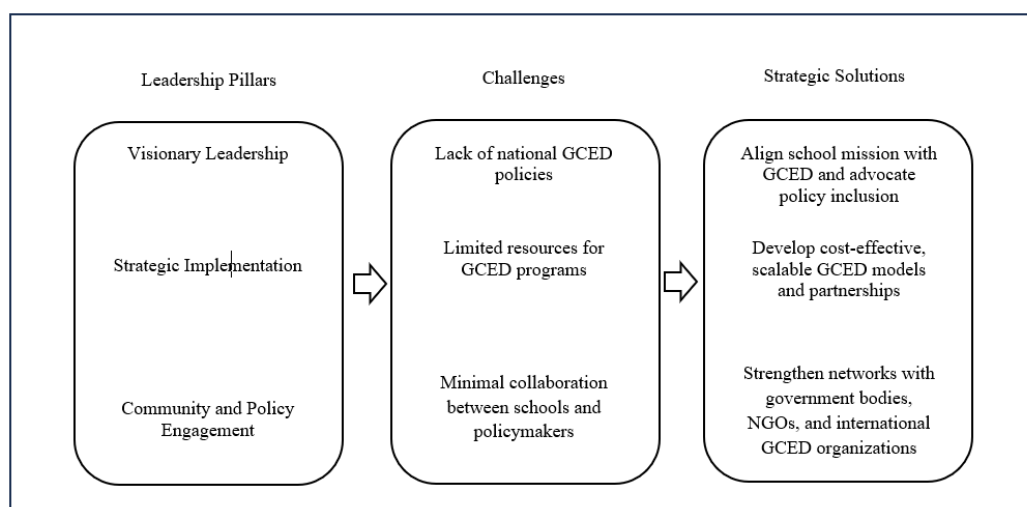


Figure 1: Leadership-driven implementation of Global Citizenship Education

The Leadership-Driven GCED Implementation Framework addresses the key policy innovation challenges that were identified in this study through three interrelated pillars. Visionary Leadership tackles cultural resistance and absent policy frameworks through change agency and vision articulation that advocates GCED integration within existing educational structures. Strategic Implementation addresses inadequate training and limited resources through systematic capacity building and resource leveraging partnerships with community organizations and international bodies.

Community-Policy Engagement confronts infrastructure deficiencies and institutional barriers through policy advocacy, stakeholder mobilization, and technology integration that creates scalable solutions for resource-constrained contexts. This framework transforms identified policy challenges into actionable solutions, enabling school leaders to navigate innovation barriers while

advancing sustainable GCED implementation that aligns with both global standards and local needs.

5.2 Implementation in Resource-Constrained Contexts

School leaders can operationalize this framework through cost-effective strategies that maximize existing resources. Subject integration represents the most practical approach, requiring no additional materials while embedding global perspectives into mathematics (using global migration data for statistics), science (examining local environmental challenges within climate change contexts), and social studies (connecting local cultural practices to global diversity themes). Partnership leveraging enables access to expertise and resources through collaborations with local universities for international student cultural exchanges, environmental NGOs for sustainability projects, and community organizations for service-learning opportunities.

Technology integration provides scalable solutions through virtual cultural exchanges via Zoom, online collaborative projects with international schools, and free UN educational resources that supplement traditional textbooks with globally relevant content. These practical applications demonstrate how the framework translates policy innovation challenges into immediate, actionable solutions for school operations and professional development programs within existing budgetary constraints.

6. Conclusion

This study affirms the crucial role of school leaders in promoting GCED as a strategic approach to achieving the SDGs. Drawing on qualitative data from school principals in Surigao del Sur, Philippines, the research revealed a strong awareness of the value of GCED in shaping globally responsible learners. However, implementation remains hindered by a lack of policy coherence, limited institutional support, and insufficient leadership training.

The proposed Leadership-Driven GCED Implementation Framework that is grounded in visionary leadership, strategic implementation, and community-policy engagement offers a practical, adaptable model to guide school leaders in embedding GCED into their institutions. This study contributes to educational leadership literature by contextualizing GCED within a Global South setting and highlighting school leaders not only as administrators but also as agents of change capable of fostering inclusive, sustainability-oriented learning environments.

This study acknowledges several limitations that future researchers should consider. The cross-sectional qualitative design captured participants' perspectives at a single point in time, potentially missing the dynamic nature of GCED implementation processes, while the brief interview duration and reliance on self-reported data may have constrained depth of exploration. Generalizability is limited by the purposive sample of 13 school principals from one educational division in the Philippines and, therefore, the findings may not represent diverse contexts across different regions or educational systems. The homogeneous participant population and absence of other stakeholders' perspectives limit the

comprehensiveness of the findings. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal studies, cross-national comparative approaches, mixed-methods frameworks, and multi-stakeholder research involving teachers, students, and community members. Ultimately, empowering school leaders through policy alignment, targeted training, and collaborative partnerships is essential for institutionalizing GCED as a transformative educational practice that can profoundly shape the future of education for generations to come.

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