



Strengthening global competence through sister school programs

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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Fadila, A. K., Hidayah, Y., & Trihastuti, M. (2026). Strengthening global competence through sister school programs. *Jurnal Kependidikan: Penelitian Inovasi Pembelajaran*, 10(1), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jk.v10i1.91399>

Received : 7 September 2025

Accepted : 9 December 2025

Published : 2 May 2026

© Jurnal Kependidikan: Penelitian Inovasi Pembelajaran



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Abstract: Civic education is fundamentally mandated to cultivate the requisite skills, character, and knowledge necessary to forge exemplary citizens. Amidst the relentless progression of globalisation, it is an absolute imperative for educators to construct pedagogical strategies strictly aligned with 21st-century demands. Globalisation unequivocally dictates that citizens possess a robust global perspective; therefore, foundational education must definitively foster global citizenship from an early age. Schools serve as indispensable institutions in expanding the cognitive frameworks and international roles of young citizens. Consequently, this study purposefully examines the implementation of the sister school programme as a critical mechanism for developing students' global perspectives. Employing a qualitative Systematic Literature Review methodology, this research rigorously analyses existing empirical evidence. The findings conclusively demonstrate that the sister school programme provides essential platforms for direct, transnational student interaction, thereby playing a paramount role in augmenting global perspectives. Through collaborative pedagogical activities, cross-border communication, and cultural exchange, students systematically broaden their comprehension of cultural diversity. This proactive engagement forcefully cultivates the tolerance and intellectual openness indispensable in the modern era, while definitively fortifying practical competencies in foreign language acquisition and digital communication.

Keywords: Civic Education; Global Perspective; Sister School Programme

Introduction

The concept of global citizenship, which has emerged as a consequence of 21st-century globalisation, has increasingly become a central focus in discussions regarding the role of education in addressing contemporary challenges. According to Murdiono (2018), global citizenship has gained significant scholarly attention as globalisation continues to blur traditional boundaries across nations. This idea, traceable to ancient Greek Stoicism, emphasises a broader sense of belonging and moral responsibility that transcends national borders. In this context, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) becomes critical, as a limited understanding of global citizenship may contribute to serious global challenges, including the persistence of terrorism, intolerance, and cultural conflict.

Data from the Global Terrorism Index (2023) indicate a 22% increase in terrorism-related deaths, reaching 8,350 fatalities. Countries such as Pakistan recorded the highest number of incidents, whilst one of the deadliest attacks occurred in Israel in October 2023, resulting in over 1,200 deaths. These findings highlight that terrorism is a global challenge requiring broader approaches rooted in international solidarity and cosmopolitan citizenship. The sister school programme represents a strategic response to this broader imperative. By facilitating direct intercultural interaction, it develops students' awareness of shared global responsibilities and their capacity for empathetic engagement across cultural differences.

However, implementing GCE continues to face persistent challenges. These include insufficient emphasis on character development in classroom practices, limited teacher competence across professional, pedagogical, personal, and social domains, and the use of monotonous teaching methods that hinder effective civic character formation. Estellés and Fischman (2021), in their review published in the *Journal of Teacher Education* (Sage, Scopus), found that GCE literature in teacher education is dominated by a "redemptive" framing that positions GCE as a solution to global problems without sufficiently engaging with the neoliberal contexts in which both GCE and teacher education operate. This critical insight implies that effective GCE implementation requires not merely the addition of global content but a fundamental reorientation of pedagogical approaches towards greater critical reflexivity and structural awareness.

In the context of globalisation, teachers are required to develop innovative strategies and teaching methods aligned with the demands of 21st-century learning. Civic education plays a critical role in preparing students to become global citizens capable of engaging with diverse environments. According to Oxfam (2015), a global citizen understands and acts upon global issues, respects diversity, and contributes to creating a more just, sustainable, and responsible world. UNESCO similarly advocates for GCE as an educational priority, emphasising the development of knowledge, skills, and values needed to navigate complex global challenges and foster a sense of shared responsibility beyond national boundaries.

The multidimensional concept of citizenship proposed by Budimansyah and Suryadi (2008) further reinforces this perspective by encompassing social, personal, and spatial dimensions. The social dimension encompasses participation in collective activities; the personal dimension involves ethical commitment and civic character; and the spatial dimension recognises citizens as members of interconnected communities at local and global levels. This multidimensional framework provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how the sister school programme may contribute simultaneously to all three dimensions of global citizenship development.

Despite its importance, GCE implementation varies considerably across countries. Approaches such as cosmopolitan citizenship highlight the importance of recognising moral responsibilities towards humanity beyond national boundaries (Linklater, 1998;

Osler and Starkey, 2018). This perspective encourages individuals to develop intercultural communication skills, tolerance, and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world. Sofyan, Habibi et al. (2025), in a structural equation modelling study involving 303 students from Indonesia and the Philippines, published in a Sage Scopus-indexed journal, demonstrated that global competence had a statistically significant medium effect on students' motivation to participate in exchange programmes, whilst cross-cultural competence and social capital contributed smaller but significant effects. This empirical evidence directly supports the value of the sister school programme as a systematic vehicle for developing the global-intercultural competencies that underpin students' motivation to participate in exchange programmes.

Previous research also indicates that many teachers lack sufficient familiarity with global citizenship concepts and teaching strategies, which affects their confidence in integrating these themes into classroom practices (Rapoport, 2013). This limitation underscores the need for innovative, practical approaches to effectively implementing GCE. Several initiatives have demonstrated the value of experiential, school-based approaches: ecological citizenship programmes such as Adiwiyata in Indonesia have shown positive outcomes in fostering global awareness (Casma et al., 2023), whilst international school partnership schemes have been identified as strategic tools for building cross-border exchanges and enhancing educational quality (Qian et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, the sister school programme emerges as a high-impact strategy for embedding GCE within everyday school practice, particularly in contexts where teachers may lack confidence to introduce global citizenship themes through the formal curriculum alone.

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of the sister school programme in developing students' global perspectives and strengthening global-oriented citizenship education. Employing a systematic literature review methodology, the study synthesises eight relevant studies to identify the key mechanisms, outcomes, and challenges associated with sister school implementation, and to assess its contribution to the development of 21st-century intercultural competencies and civic dispositions aligned with both the Indonesian national curriculum and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). A systematic review examines and synthesises existing literature that is relevant to specific research questions, either in terms of methodological alignment or ontological similarity (Berrang-Ford et al., 2015). This approach follows standardised methodological procedures, including systematic searching, screening, critical appraisal, synthesis, and reporting of findings from publications related to the research topic (Pati and Lorusso, 2018). The SLR provides a more rigorous and comprehensive understanding than traditional narrative reviews (Delgado-Rodriguez, 2018).

The literature search was conducted systematically across national and international databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and journal portals. Search terms included: "sister school programme," "global citizenship education," "intercultural competence school partnership," "school exchange programme global awareness," and "global-oriented citizenship education." Inclusion criteria comprised: (a) studies published between 2015 and 2025; (b) articles discussing sister school implementation, international school partnerships, global citizenship education, or intercultural competence development; and (c) peer-reviewed publications in either nationally accredited or internationally indexed journals. Exclusion criteria excluded studies unrelated to school-level partnerships, global citizenship, or the development of intercultural competence.

Findings and Discussion

Findings: A Synthesis of Sister School Programme Research

The sister school programme is a flagship initiative of schools operating at both national and international levels, with a primary aim of developing students' global perspectives. The programme's success depends significantly on teacher leadership in facilitating global awareness through structured programme activities. The following table presents a synthesis of eight relevant studies identified through the systematic literature review process.

Table 1. Synthesis of Research Studies Related to the Sister School Programme

No.	Researcher(s)	Title	Key Findings
1	Jasmine & Setiawan (2023)	Implementation of The Twin School Class Programme in Building Institutional Image (Case Study at SMAN 2 Mataram)	The programme produced tangible outputs including an international partnership with Christian College Geelong, Australia, and collaboration with local schools and government agencies. Intangible outputs included improved English proficiency, global awareness, and a positive institutional image. The programme enhanced students' academic, social, and emotional development, expanded their networks, built interpersonal character, and increased adaptability, self-confidence, and empathy.
2	Fatmasari (2015)	Implementation of the Sister School Programme (Case Study at SMA Negeri 3 Malang)	Implementation took place over one week through academic and non-academic activities. Human resources involved included students, teachers, parents, partner universities, and the Malang City Government. Success indicators comprised student participation, stakeholder satisfaction, programme sustainability, and return visits from partner schools. Key barriers included differences in school timetables, language obstacles, and high programme costs.
3	Sofanudin (2019)	Best Practice of Curriculum Implementation at Sekolah Alam Insan Mulia (SAIM) Surabaya	SAIM's curriculum integrates physical, contextual, and psychological dimensions of nature. Implementation employs integrated, joyful, and cooperative learning. The secondary curriculum incorporates Cambridge Checkpoint and Geographic Learning, while the senior secondary curriculum is enriched with an internationally-oriented entrepreneurial framework.
4	Mutiarin, Sakir & Widyaningsih (2017)	Enhancing the Competitiveness of TK ABA through Organisational Strengthening and	The sister school adopted a people-centred development concept, improving the competitiveness of TK ABA through organisational strengthening and ICT. The programme produced flagship

		Information Technology via Sister School Programme	institutional programmes and a website for service and promotional purposes, demonstrating the relevance of sister school partnerships for early childhood education contexts.
5	Maryono (2015)	Sister School as a Cross-Cultural Symbiosis in the Service of Educational Policy	Sister school is conceptualised as cross-cultural education requiring transparent preparation and mutually beneficial management. The collaboration proceeds from institutional commitment through implementation to collaborative product evaluation, with outcomes benefiting students, teachers, institutions, the community, and government.
6	Qian, Yang, Tang et al. (2025)	The Development Trajectory of the Sister School Scheme Between Hong Kong and Chinese Mainland Schools: From the Intertextuality Perspective	Using intertextuality as a theoretical lens, this study traces the policy evolution of the Hong Kong-mainland sister school scheme since 2004. Findings show that each successive policy draws on and modifies previous frameworks in a network of interconnected references. The study positions school partnership policies as strategic tools for cross-border educational exchange and quality improvement.
7	Sofyan, Habibi et al. (2025)	The Impact of Global-Intercultural Competence and Social Capital on Students' Motivation to Participate in Exchange Programmes: A PLS-SEM Approach	In a study of 303 students from Indonesia and the Philippines, global competence demonstrated a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.175$) on exchange programme motivation, whilst cross-cultural competence and social capital showed smaller but significant effects. The findings confirm that building students' global and intercultural competencies is essential for sustaining participation in exchange programmes.
8	Casmana, Dewantara et al. (2023)	Global Citizenship: Preparing the Younger Generation to Possess Pro-Environment Behaviour, Mutual Assistance, and Tolerance Awareness through School Engagement	School-based programmes in Indonesia integrating local values with global orientations effectively cultivated pro-environmental behaviour, mutual assistance, and tolerance. Active school engagement through culturally grounded experiential activities was identified as a key mechanism for developing students' global citizenship dispositions.

Discussion

The Sister School Programme and the Development of Global Perspectives

The synthesised evidence consistently demonstrates that the sister school programme plays a significant role in developing students' global perspectives. As Arpanudin et al. (2025) explain, global awareness encompasses an individual's capacity to understand, appreciate, and interact effectively with diverse cultures, a competence of critical importance in the current era of globalisation. Hidayah et al. (2025) add that through learning experiences grounded in intercultural interaction, students develop resilience, namely the capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of cultural difference and challenge. The sister school programme thus serves as a vehicle not merely for broadening students' knowledge of other cultures but for cultivating the affective and social competencies that underpin meaningful intercultural engagement.

Sofyan, Habibi et al.'s (2025) structural equation modelling study provides particularly compelling quantitative evidence for this claim. Using a sample of 303 students from Indonesia and the Philippines, the study demonstrated that global competence had a statistically significant medium effect ($f^2 = 0.175$) on students' motivation to participate in exchange programmes. This finding implies that developing students' global-intercultural competencies is not simply an incidental outcome of sister school participation but a foundational prerequisite for motivating sustained engagement. For programme designers and school administrators, this suggests that embedding explicit intercultural competence development activities within sister school frameworks, rather than assuming that exposure alone will produce competence gains, is essential for maximising the programme's transformative potential.

Estellés and Fischman (2021) provide an important critical counterweight to overly optimistic framings of GCE programmes. Their systematic review of GCE literature in teacher education found that the dominant "redemptive" framing of GCE tends to construct teachers as naive idealists rather than as critically informed professionals who understand the structural conditions within which GCE operates. This critical insight is directly relevant to the sister school context: for the programme to contribute genuinely to global citizenship development rather than merely to intercultural tourism, it must be accompanied by pedagogical frameworks that encourage students and teachers to engage critically with global inequalities, power relations, and the structural dimensions of cultural difference, not simply to celebrate diversity. Schools implementing sister school programmes should therefore integrate critical global citizenship pedagogy alongside experiential cultural exchange activities.

This programme not only broadens students' perspectives on global issues but also enhances their understanding of cultural and social diversity, thereby facilitating the development of intercultural communication skills. Pekala (2025) notes that a deepening understanding of cultural and social diversity helps students appreciate differences in their surroundings and engage more constructively with otherness. Febiantoni et al. (2025) further emphasise that in a global context, experiential learning through cross-border collaboration develops the skills needed to interact effectively in an increasingly connected world, enriching students' understanding of the social, political, and cultural dynamics between countries.

Policy Implications and Challenges of Sister School Implementation

Qian, Yang, Tang et al.'s (2025) analysis of the Hong Kong-mainland sister school scheme provides valuable evidence about the policy conditions for sustainable sister school development. Their intertextuality-based analysis reveals that the scheme's development since 2004 has been shaped by successive layers of policy, each drawing on and reinterpreting its predecessors within a complex intertextual network. This finding has important implications for the Indonesian context: the long-term sustainability of sister school programmes depends not only on individual school commitment but also on the development of a coherent, evolving policy framework that

provides institutional continuity across changes in school leadership, curriculum policy, and governmental priorities.

The sister school programme is most effective when supported by good institutional management and sustained commitment from both schools and students. Through the mutual exchange of experiences between teachers and students, the programme enhances not only students' knowledge but also the quality of teaching practice. Sukarno et al. (2025) confirm that broadening students' exposure to cultural diversity and global perspectives improves the overall quality of education by enriching teachers' pedagogical repertoires. Collaboration formalised through Memoranda of Understanding and joint activities strengthens international relations and advances educational standards beyond the immediate school context.

Casmana et al.'s (2023) study of school-based citizenship programmes in Indonesia demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating local cultural values with global orientations. Their findings confirm that experiential, school-based programmes grounded in local contexts, such as the Adiwiyata green school programme, successfully cultivate global citizenship dispositions including pro-environmental behaviour, mutual assistance, and tolerance. The sister school programme shares this fundamental pedagogical logic of learning through authentic experience, whilst adding the distinctive dimension of direct cross-border interaction. This combination of local cultural grounding and international exchange positions the sister school programme as a culturally responsive approach to GCE, particularly well-suited to the Indonesian educational context.

Lau (2025) emphasises that strengthening school capacity for global networking, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and enabling curriculum adaptation to the evolving global context are complementary goals that require sustained institutional investment. This institutional perspective complements the student-level evidence: whilst individual students benefit from intercultural experience, the broader institutional benefits of the sister school programme, including improved teacher professional development, enhanced institutional reputation, and stronger international networks, depend on systematic investment in programme management, staff capacity-building, and policy alignment with national curriculum priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Significant challenges to sister school implementation persist nonetheless. Identified barriers include differences in school timetables and academic calendars across countries, language obstacles, particularly in English communication, and the high costs associated with international partnership activities (Fatmasari, 2015). Rapoport (2013) further identifies limited teacher familiarity with global citizenship pedagogies as a structural barrier that reduces the depth of GCE integration achievable through school-based programmes. Ayaga (2025) demonstrates that collaborative, inter-institutional educational initiatives can address these challenges by improving teacher professional development and promoting inclusion, equity, and accessibility in line with the SDGs. These findings collectively suggest that addressing the structural barriers to sister school participation requires multi-level interventions spanning teacher professional development, institutional policy support, and equitable resource allocation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the sister school programme is an effective strategy for strengthening global-oriented citizenship education by providing students with meaningful opportunities to interact directly with peers from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. Through collaborative learning activities, cross-border communication, and cultural exchange, students develop broader understandings of

cultural diversity, cultivate intercultural communication competencies, and build attitudes of tolerance and openness essential for active participation in an increasingly interconnected world.

The evidence synthesised in this review demonstrates that the programme's impact operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously: it develops students' global awareness and intercultural competencies (Sofyan, Habibi et al., 2025), strengthens civic dispositions through experiential learning (Casmara et al., 2023), and builds institutional capacity for sustained international engagement (Qian et al., 2025). Estellés and Fischman's (2021) critical lens reminds practitioners that this experiential impact is maximised when sister school programmes are accompanied by pedagogical frameworks encouraging critical engagement with global inequalities, rather than remaining at the level of celebratory cultural exchange. Practical experience in mastering foreign languages and utilising information technology for cross-border communication further strengthens students' digital competence and 21st-century readiness.

Several recommendations emerge from these findings. Educational institutions should continue developing and expanding sister school programmes as an integral component of the globalisation curriculum, complemented by intensive foreign language training and structured digital skills instruction. The development of teachers' critical global citizenship pedagogies, as recommended by Estellés and Fischman (2021), should be treated as a prerequisite rather than an afterthought for successful programme implementation. Schools and governments should work collaboratively to develop coherent policy frameworks providing institutional continuity for sister school partnerships across changes in leadership and curriculum policy (Qian et al., 2025). Financial support mechanisms should be developed to ensure that participation in sister school activities is equitably accessible rather than restricted to schools with sufficient resources. Project-based and collaborative learning approaches that engage students in substantive cross-border problem-solving should be integrated into the programme design to foster creativity, leadership, teamwork, and cultural awareness. Through these combined measures, the sister school programme can more fully realise its potential as a transformative vehicle for preparing young citizens to engage responsibly and critically with the challenges of our shared global future.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to express sincere gratitude to all parties who contributed to the completion of this research, particularly the participants and institutions whose experiences informed this systematic review. The authors also acknowledge the institutional support of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta and STKIP Pasundan in facilitating this collaborative research initiative.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this study.

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