A Review of Research on the Concept of Global Competence

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Abstract: With the acceleration of globalization, cultivating talents with cross-cultural communication skills, a global perspective, and problem-solving abilities has become a critical issue in the field of education. This paper aims to critically summarize and organize the academic discussions on the concept of global competence, offering an in-depth analysis of the controversies, debates, and emerging consensus surrounding this complex concept. The research finds that although there are broad disagreements regarding the definition, usage, and research paradigms of global competence, there is a basic consensus: global competence emphasizes an individual's ability to effectively communicate, collaborate, and solve global challenges in a globalized environment. This review hopes to provide a clear framework for further research in this field and to advance academic understanding and application of the concept of global competence.

Keywords: global competence, concept research, cultural exchange.

1.   Introduction

The concept of competence was first introduced by Harvard psychologist David McClelland in his 1973 paper, Testing for Competence Rather Than for Intelligence. He argued that students' exam results in school do not necessarily predict future success in the workplace, and intelligence tests cannot forecast their achievements on the job. Thus, he advocated for competence testing as a replacement for intelligence tests[1]. Upon its introduction, this concept sparked widespread discussion in various countries and academic circles. Later, the global educational organization WorldSavvy emphasized that global competence is an inseparable part of the skills, values, and actions today's youth should possess. Competence enables young people to become active citizens, effective collaborators, and problem solvers, offering them opportunities to adapt, survive, and thrive in a diverse and interconnected world[2]. Particularly in December 2017, when the OECD released the PISA 2018 Global Competence Framework at Harvard University in the U.S., global competence was formally included in the PISA tests, drawing global attention, including from China.

Although the definition of global competence has been widely discussed, a clear issue emerges: whether in policy discussions or academic discourse, the term global competence is frequently used, yet there is significant variation in how it is understood. Many scholars talk about how to cultivate global competence without having a clear understanding of what it actually means. Additionally, some scholars confuse global competence with related concepts, which has drawn considerable attention. The ongoing discussions have led to ambiguity and misuse of the concept. It is therefore

necessary to critically review the academic discourse on global competence to clarify its definition. This review aims to address the following questions: What perspectives have scholars used to explore the concept of global competence? What are the relatively established and influential viewpoints on the concept? What consensus exists among these views, and what are the points of divergence?

Various reports, such as Global Competence for an Inclusive World (2016), PISA Global Competence Framework: Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World (2017), and Teaching for Global Competence in a Rapidly Changing World (2018), have contributed to the academic understanding of global competence. However, there is no unified translation of global competence in China. Some scholars translate it as "全球胜任力" (global competence), while others use terms like "全球素养" (global literacy) or "全球化能力" (globalization capability). Despite these different translations, the underlying concept remains consistent. Upon analyzing the relevant literature, we identified three primary perspectives on the discussion of global competence: (1)Direct Conceptual Definition: This perspective focuses on defining and explaining the concept of global competence, including its meaning and essence. (2)Theoretical Model Construction: This approach attempts to build theoretical frameworks that define global competence in a structured way. (3)Assessment Systems Development: This perspective seeks to establish a system for evaluating global competence from an operational and assessment-oriented standpoint. The following sections will review existing studies from these three perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of global competence research.

2. Research on Direct Conceptual Definition of Global Competence

The definition and conceptualization of global competence is the foundation for understanding and studying this emerging field. Therefore, many scholars in China and abroad have focused on defining the concept.

Research on the definition of global competence forms the premise and basis for further exploration in this area. Since the concept of global competence was first introduced in 1988 by the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) in Educating for Global Competence[3], there has been extensive scholarly discussion. However, no unified understanding has been reached yet. Different scholars, based on their respective research backgrounds and perspectives, have provided various interpretations of global competence. The United States, being one of the earliest countries to recognize the urgency of cultivating global competence in students, has played a significant role in the development of this concept. In What does it mean to be globally competent?, Hunter and colleagues approached global competence from a practical standpoint, defining it as "the knowledge and ability to recognize cultural differences, the interest in engaging with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and the use of language and cultural knowledge to communicate in the most effective way in various environments"[4]. This definition emphasizes the core role of cultural understanding and dialogue in global competence and provides specific guidance for educational practice. Furthermore, Cultivating Student Global Competence: A Pilot Experimental Study interprets global competence from a broader perspective, suggesting that it is the ability to understand cultural norms and global events beyond specific fields or disciplines, enabling effective interaction, communication, and collaboration in non-native cultural environments[5]. This broader definition expands the application of global competence, making it a comprehensive skill set that is applicable in various cross-cultural contexts. In the PISA Global Competence Framework, developed after gathering feedback from experts and member countries, the OECD provided a novel and challenging definition of global competence. This definition states that individuals should be able to recognize local, global, and cross-cultural issues, understand and appreciate others' perspectives and worldviews, engage in respectful and effective interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, and take

responsible action for collective well-being and sustainable development[6]. This definition not only encompasses elements from earlier literature but also introduces a focus on local and global issues, sustainability, and collective well-being, offering new avenues for further research and development in global competence.

Since CIEE's initial introduction of the term global competence, scholars have continuously deepened their exploration of its meaning. Hunter and colleagues provided a practical definition that highlighted cultural understanding and dialogue, while later works expanded the concept to include broader cross-cultural interactions. The OECD's innovative framework synthesized previous elements, adding an emphasis on local and global perspectives, sustainability, and collective well-being, infusing fresh energy into global competence research. Each successive piece of literature has progressively enriched and deepened the understanding of global competence.

3.   Research on Theoretical Model Framework for Global Competence

In the process of studying global competence, scholars have not only defined its concept but have also attempted to establish theoretical model frameworks to more systematically understand and explain this complex concept. Lambert, often regarded as the "father of global competence education," summarized global competence into five key elements in his work Educational Exchange and Global Competence: knowledge, empathy, support, foreign language proficiency, and work performance. This definition not only provided a theoretical framework for later researchers but also emphasized the importance and complexity of global competence in the field of education[7]. This framework highlights the multidimensional nature of global competence at the individual level, encompassing aspects such as knowledge reserves, emotional attitudes, and behavioral performance.

As research has progressed, scholars have attempted to construct more comprehensive and systematic theoretical models. For example, some researchers have divided global competence into four dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, with each dimension further broken down into specific sub-elements. This classification helps clarify the essence of global competence and provides more detailed guidance for educational practice.

Moreover, some scholars have developed theoretical models from perspectives such as cross-cultural communication and global problem-solving. These models not only consider how global competence manifests at the individual level but also examine its social impact, such as promoting international understanding and fostering global cooperation. These efforts to build models provide educators and policymakers with practical tools for shaping curricula and strategies to cultivate global competence effectively.

4.   Research on Exploring Global Competence Assessment Systems

The OECD's PISA test has now included global competence assessment in its agenda. In the report Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World, global competence is described as comprising three levels of abilities: first, the ability to critically and multi-dimensionally analyze global and cross-cultural issues; second, the ability to understand how differences influence people's perceptions, judgments, and understanding of self and others; third, the ability to engage in open, appropriate, and effective collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds based on mutual respect[8]. Through analysis of the 2018 PISA test, Chinese scholars in A Comprehensive Assessment of Global Competence in Three Dimensions summarized three aspects of global competence assessment: (1) Knowledge and understanding of global issues, which primarily examines familiarity with global issues, trends, and the interconnections between related factors; (2) Knowledge and understanding of cross-cultural differences, including respect for cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication skills, and openness to different cultures; (3) Analytical and critical

thinking, which assesses the ability to analyze global issues logically and systematically, identify others' cultural perspectives, and critically evaluate the credibility of materials[9].In The Constituent Elements of Global Competence, scholars discuss the assessment tools used by the OECD in the 2018 PISA test, which included two key components: (1) a cognitive test specifically designed to measure "global competence" and (2) a questionnaire collecting self-reported information from students on global issues, cultural awareness, cognitive and social skills, and their attitudes. This questionnaire also gathered information on schools' and teachers' activities aimed at cultivating students' global competence[10].

The findings of A Comprehensive Assessment of Global Competence in Three Dimensions echoed the theoretical framework proposed in Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World, demonstrating the effectiveness and feasibility of the global competence assessment in practice. The Constituent Elements of Global Competence provided a detailed introduction to the assessment methods used in the 2018 PISA test, including cognitive testing and questionnaires, offering concrete guidance for practical evaluation efforts.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Current discussions on the concept of global competence are primarily centered around three research perspectives, each producing classic and widely influential viewpoints. Under these perspectives, some scholars emphasize global competence as the ability to communicate and collaborate across cultures, while others focus on the individual's capacity to solve global issues. Additionally, there are perspectives that regard global competence as a key quality necessary for 21st-century talent. Although these viewpoints hold significant positions in the field of global competence, they display certain divergences in their specific definitions and constituent elements. These differences mainly arise from variations in the breadth of global competence definitions and the focus on the diversity of its elements, reflecting the plurality and complexity of academic understanding on this topic. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that despite differences in definitions and focal points, these perspectives share fundamental similarities. This consensus indicates that, while the expressions and emphases may vary, the academic community largely agrees on the core definition of global competence.

The study of the global competence concept aims to cultivate the key abilities individuals need in a globalized context. Enhancing these competencies not only improves an individual's global competitiveness but also promotes international exchange and cooperation, which is essential for addressing global challenges and fostering global development. This paper also reveals the consensus and divergences within the research, offering guidance for future research directions and helping to advance the development of global competence studies. At the same time, while integrating multiple perspectives, attention should be paid to the differences and gaps between studies, to more comprehensively guide the practical application and innovation of the global competence concept.

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