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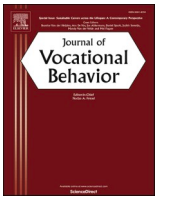

Decent education as a precursor to decent work: An overview and construct conceptualization

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ABSTRACT

In the current paper, we introduce the concept of decent education and highlight this new construct as a critical predictor of decent work. We first review three broad areas where indicators of quality education have been studied and utilized: Subjective student experiences, school-to-work programs, and macro-level recommendations (e.g., assessing quality in schools, counties, states, countries, etc.). Second, we draw from these areas to identify six core components that comprise decent education. Specifically, these components pertain to individuals' subjective experiences with their high school education and include: physical safety, psychological safety, quality instruction, equitable learning environments, opportunities to foster social connection, and adequate educational/vocational programming for post-high school. Third, we discuss the construct's place within Psychology of Working Theory and provide a series of recommendations for scholars wishing to study decent education. It is hoped that this new construct will be useful to scholars as they work to further understand the important connection between educational experiences and access to decent work.

1. Introduction

Over the last five years, interest in the concept of decent work has rapidly increased within vocational psychology. Decent work for all individuals has been championed as an aspiration by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1999, 2014) and the construct also serves as the centerpiece of the recently developed Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016). Dozens of studies have documented how access to decent work is predicated on the degree to which an individual has privilege and access to resources that promote freedom in career decision-making (Blustein & Duffy, 2020). PWT suggests that, in particular, structural experiences of economic constraints and marginalization across the lifespan impact the likelihood of adults attaining decent work. A group of researchers recently expanded PWT specifically to the school-to-work transition process (STWT; Masdonati et al., 2021) to capture the impact of the economic constraints and marginalization during individuals' transition from school to work.

However, neither the original PWT nor the STWT expansion includes a critical factor that requires further attention, experiences with education. Namely, although one's experiences in school and education are closely connected to PWT's primary structural factors, the theories do not fully capture what constitutes an education that promotes access to decent work. This gap is somewhat glaring

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given the breadth of research demonstrating that students who experience high-levels of economic constraints and marginalization tend to have poor experiences with education (e.g., Engle & Black, 2008). Poor educational experiences–particularly during high school–are in turn linked to decreased access to, and attainment of, higher education as well as struggles transitioning from school to work (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Rojewski, 2020). Thus, in order to paint a more complete picture of how an individual is able to secure decent work across time, it is imperative to also account for their educational experiences.

In the current paper, we address this limitation by conceptualizing a new construct – *decent education* – and document how access to decent education promotes access to decent work. Although the exact term "decent education" is not commonly used within the educational or vocational literature, analogous constructs and frameworks exist that we first review. Second, drawing from these existing frameworks and constructs, we propose and discuss in detail the multiple, measurable components that make up decent education. These components were developed to a) capture a broad array of factors that contribute to the experience of decent education and b) represent factors that are measurable via current or retrospective self-assessment. Importantly, like decent work's focus on broad experiences within employment, we view the decent education construct as inclusive of both direct experiences with education (e.g., receiving quality instruction) and experiences within the educational environment (e.g., physically safe space).

Akin to the measurement of decent work within PWT, we conceptualize decent education as the subjective experience an individual has with their school-based education. Importantly, although we hypothesize that experiences with decent education are predicted by structural and contextual factors, the construct as conceptualized in the current paper is a psychological variable that can be measured at the individual level. After conceptualizing the construct, third, we discuss the links between decent education and decent work. Specifically, the primary aims of the current paper are to both propose a conceptualization of decent education construct and position it within the larger PWT framework as a predictor of decent work (See Fig. 1). We discuss PWT-informed predictors of access to decent education and proceed to elaborate on how decent education over time may predict decent work via several PWT-informed mediating constructs. Finally, we close by proposing a series of future research and practice implications. In particular, we highlight the need for an expanded understanding of the variety of factors that may affect access to decent education and the potentially broad ways decent education leads to decent work across time.

2. Existing frameworks and constructs

In this section, we review several existing frameworks and constructs that address aspects of a decent education. Scholars, educators, and policymakers have historically been invested in having all students receive the highest quality education. However, approaches to assessing quality education vary considerably both in terms of scope (e.g., micro vs. macro-level factors), type of assessment (e.g., individuals' perceptions vs. objective measures), and specific aspects examined (e.g., individual grades, overall school performance, school belongingness, etc.). There is no unifying framework to capture quality of education, which is likely due to the vast array of approaches people may use depending on their interests and factors they see as most important. Thus, in the following review, we covered three major approaches to encompass various perspectives, ranging from the most to least applicable to our current, psychological conceptualization of decent education. These include: a) Perspectives focused on student's self-assessment of their education, b) School-to-work approaches that highlight the degree to which schools are preparing students for a life post-

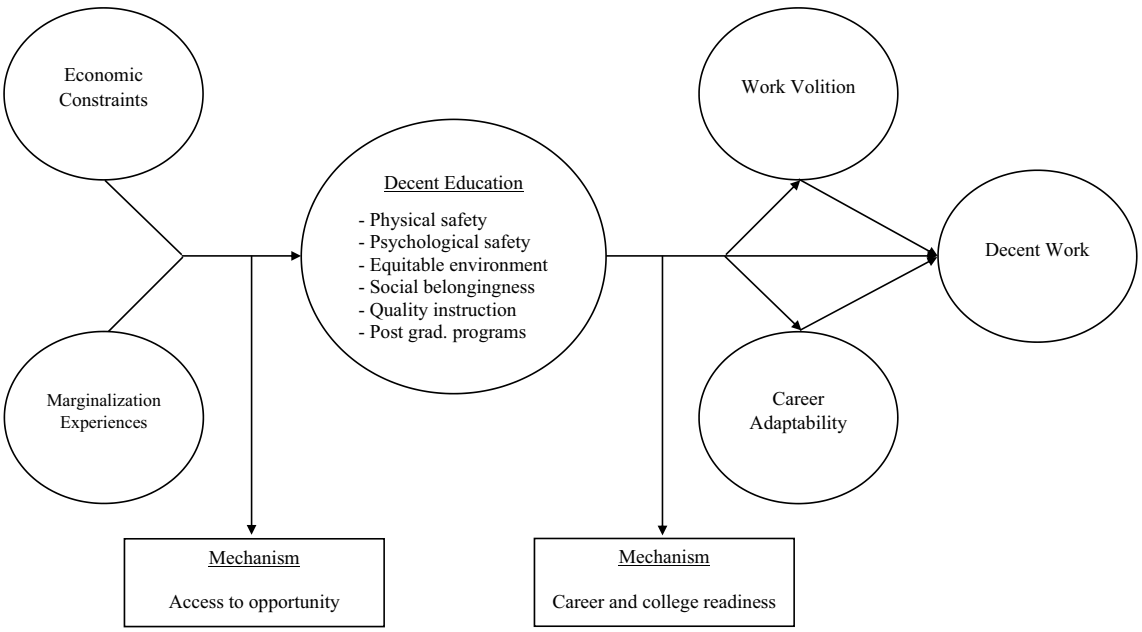

Fig. 1. Decent education within Psychology of Working Theory model.

graduation, and c) Macro-level approaches focused on the quality of education in schools, counties, states, and countries.

Although our conceptualization of decent education is an individual, psychological construct (most similar to the first category above student self-assessment), our review includes a brief discussion of macro-level conceptualizations in an effort to provide the full breadth of how the quality of education can be assessed. Considering macro-level conceptualizations is necessary because there may be essential components of decent education that may not be captured by students' experiences alone. In other words, there are components of decent education that students may not pinpoint due to their status. This scoping review allows us to pinpoint key themes regarding potential components of quality education, many of which may be embedded in macro-level approaches while also being easily transferable to an individual lens. Following this review, we draw on these themes to delineate our definition of decent education.

2.1. Subjective student experience

The closest approach to our measurement of decent education exists in the literature surrounding students' subjective experiences with schools. Within this literature, students are typically surveyed at an individual level about their experiences with various components of their education, with researchers making a determination of what components would be indicative of a positive experience and asking about those components. However, as previously mentioned, there is no universally accepted framework or theory concerning how students self-assess their education even though many empirical studies have examined how high school students (the population of interest for our conceptualization of decent education) assess their school experience. These studies include factors such as disciplinary climate (Ma & Klinger, 2000), safety and inclusion in school (McEvoy & Welker, 2000), belongingness, engagement in learning (Van Ryzin, 2011), and availability of extracurricular activities (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011). One multifaceted construct that encompasses a variety of student experience factors is *school climate*. Since the 1950s, educators and researchers have acknowledged the importance of school climate to students' school experience and have systematically studied the construct. As a result, studies have shown that a better school climate is positively associated with students' emotional and mental well-being (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Suldo et al., 2012), school satisfaction, and academic satisfaction (Zullig et al., 2011); and negatively related to rates of drug use, and suspension in school (Lee et al., 2011).

School climate has been variously defined in the literature, with some scholars focusing on the objective aspects of school (e.g., school facility quality) and others focusing on subjective aspects of school (e.g., belongingness). Cohen et al. (2009) combined both aspects into one definition, "the quality and character of school life," consisting of multiple elements: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and environment and structure. Other scholars have added elements to the initial four that Cohen and colleagues proposed, including order and discipline, academic outcomes, school connectedness (Zullig et al., 2010), and the school improvement process (Thapa et al., 2013). Based on the various scholars' conceptualizations of school climate and considering the relevance to student assessment of education, we reviewed the following elements of school climate: 1) safety, order, and discipline, 2) relationships and connectedness, and 3) teaching and learning.

In the school climate literature, safety refers to perceived social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). Feeling safe in school is essential for healthy student development and learning. Feeling unsafe in school due to reasons such as bullying and punitive disciplinary actions has been associated with poor school adjustment, poor academic achievement, lower attendance, and higher dropout rates (Akiba, 2010; Astor et al., 2010; Glew et al., 2005; Nansel et al., 2003). Order and discipline are closely related to safety as effective school policy, and discipline management and improved order are associated with better school safety (Gregory et al., 2010). In a qualitative study, students reported that having flexible school policies that consider the unique needs of students and considerate communication of disciplinary action with parents was helpful toward their success (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011). Students also reported that flexible teachers and administrators and school policies that meet the unique needs of students were important (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011). In sum, the literature suggests that students' sense of safety at school, which is promoted by consistent and fair school policy and discipline, is essential to student development and learning.

Also in this literature, relationships and connectedness refer to various parties, including peer to peer and student to teacher (Cohen et al., 2009; Zullig et al., 2010). Positive relationships with their peers and teachers have been related to increased student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Saggers, 2015), and positive school-family relationships are positively associated with students' academic success (Zullig et al., 2011). Studies have shown that students' sense of belongingness to the school community leads to higher student retention and graduation rates (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011) and fewer behavioral problems (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Particularly for students of color, how much they feel connected with the school has been positively related to better achievement and fewer discipline problems (Mattison & Aber, 2007). For students, forming positive relationships with their peers and friends and feeling a sense of connection and belonging to the school community appear to be a motivating factor in and of itself to do better academically and behaviorally.

Finally, experiences around teaching and learning are another vital element in the school climate literature. To better facilitate student learning, quality of instruction that involves high expectations for students, respect for all learning styles, providing engaging materials and teaching methods, and opportunities for independent and collaborative work are essential (Cohen et al., 2009). Moreover, to promote the aforementioned feelings of safety and connectedness among students, quality teachers and administrators incorporate relevant norms, goals, and values in teaching and other learning activities that students engage in (Thapa et al., 2013). For example, activities like community service and debates in which students can actively participate can facilitate learning while promoting collaboration and connection (Homana et al., 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002). In one qualitative study, students reported that having extracurricular activity opportunities and a "no pass, no play policy" in place motivated students to maintain acceptable grades

and build close relationships with teachers and peers while engaging in extracurricular activities (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011). Through a well-thought-out learning process in curricular and extracurricular activities, students can build trust with peers and teachers, feel connected to school, and feel safe at school.

Based on the review, it is clear that multiple aspects make up school climate. Safety and discipline, teaching and learning, and relationships and connectedness – in particular - are important factors for students' school experience. For the current paper, capturing each of these elements seems imperative when considering students' assessment of decent education. However, although the school climate literature reflects student perceptions of school experiences well, it lacks discourse around the role of high school in preparing students to proceed to their work and careers after graduation. This limitation in the school climate literature is addressed in greater depth in the school-to-work transition literature.

2.2. School-to-work

Although more limited in scope, the school-to-work (STW) literature is where most research has been done from a vocational perspective concerning that aspect of quality education. Drawing from several theories, frameworks, and policies, school-to-work transition programs are typically offered as a part of the high school curriculum and are aimed at preparing high school students during this transition. These programs can be designed to prepare students for college and to enter the workforce. Research has suggested that students encountering higher levels of marginalization and economic constraints are more likely to struggle in the transition from school to work (Masdonati, 2010; Vuolo et al., 2014), highlighting the utility of STW programs in particular for minoritized and low-income students.

Although the primary goals of these programs concern college/workforce participation after graduation, many students reap the benefits of these programs while they are engaging in them (Balcazar et al., 2018; Pinquart et al., 2003; Woods et al., 2010). For example, Pinquart et al. (2003) found that academic self-efficacy increased for students in a STW program because it encouraged students to see how their academic experiences relate to future work. Other STW research has demonstrated that as students' engagement in academics and the community increased, grades and graduation rates improved, especially among students with disabilities (Balcazar et al., 2018). It is important to note these programs are typically offered to students in their junior or senior year of high school; however, the benefits could be much greater if offered earlier in their high school education (Perry et al., 2007). Students also experience the direct benefits of STW interventions. For example, some provide students with "work-based education," which teaches students about work tasks, work environments, and specific fields (Bailey, 1995; Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015). Some schools, particularly those in rural areas, work with the community to offer students internships or apprenticeships (Hutchins & Akos, 2013). Other programs are exclusively mentoring programs dedicated to expanding a student's network and promoting professional development (Renn et al., 2014).

Recently, scholars have called for STW interventions to be universally integrated into high school curricula (Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015; Masdonati et al., 2021). These calls stem from the reality that some students underestimate their qualifications prior to entering the workforce and apply for jobs that do not provide adequate compensation or are not considered decent work (Bailey, 1995; ILO, 2008, 2012). In addition to being prepared for seeking a job, students are also prepared to face a changing workforce and a flexible job, highlighting career adaptability (Savickas, 1999). Career adaptability is relevant for one's first job after high school and is important for future flexibility regarding work. For example, if a student accepts an underpaying job or one that does not provide additional training, it may hinder their ability to change careers later (Savickas, 1999). Recently, Masdonati et al. (2021), provided a conceptualization of this school-to-work transition using a PWT framework, suggesting that when students have access to these resources, they may achieve decent work and meaningful work (Duffy et al., 2016). These experiences prepare students, help them connect with potential employers, build social capital, and provide time for practicing necessary skills for future employment (Bailey, 1995; Fisher et al., 2020; Kromboltz & Worthington, 2011; Renn et al., 2014).

In summary, the literature on school-to-work addresses the notion that quality education cannot just exist in the present but – at least for high school students – must also help promote a vision for the future. As such, including post-graduation programming as a component of decent education is important.

2.3. Macro level approaches

The majority of scholarship concerning the two sections reviewed above centers on individual students' experiences in school or with school-to-work preparation. However, there is a vast infrastructure in place to examine quality education at macro levels – particularly at the organizational and policy level. Although this is not how we propose to assess or measure decent education in the current paper, it is important nonetheless to briefly highlight these approaches to be comprehensive in our review.

Education has been one of the most discussed topics among international organizations such as OECD, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), due to its critical role in the economic development of countries. There has been a consensus among these international organizations that education is a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2015). Thus, the main focus of these organizations has been to enhance access to education. A key distinction to note is that schooling does not mean learning. More specifically, students enrolled in schools may not acquire the skills they need if a high quality of education is not ensured (OECD, 2012). For example, research findings show that nearly 130 million students may not achieve basic literacy by 4th grade (UNICEF, 2015). Similarly, UNESCO (2015) acknowledges that the *quality of education* is an "integral part" of the right to education (pg. 30; UNESCO), which further supports the vitality of the emphasis on understanding the components of high-quality educational practices.

Perhaps the closest concept to decent education developed in the current paper is UNICEF's (2000) quality education concept, consisting of five core components. First, UNICEF emphasizes that it is essential to focus on the "quality of the learner". More specifically, they suggest that focusing on children and providing them with resources that support their physical and psychological health to enhance their development is crucial for the overall quality of education. Second, the importance of the learning environment has been reflected. The learning environment consists of both physical elements such as quality of school facilities and psychosocial elements such as inclusivity and psychological safety. Quality content, which was broadly defined as the taught curriculum, is the third component. Under this domain are literacy and numeracy and the incorporation of life skills in the educational content. In UNICEF's definition, these life skills include skills required for career development (e.g., etiquette, vocational skills) and interpersonal skills (e.g., goal setting, decision making, and coping skills).

The fourth component is quality of process, which consists of the ways in which teachers' and school administrators' approaches to education impact students' learning experiences. Lastly, UNICEF's conceptualization of quality education includes high-quality student outcomes. These outcomes involve measurable academic achievement outcomes (e.g., literacy, numeracy), as well as outcomes that are indicators of competency in other aspects of life (e.g., interpersonal skills, community participation, risk-taking behaviors; UNICEF, 2000). Recommendations from organizations like UNICEF suggest that quality education – like decent work – should be a fundamental human right. These organizations propose that an inclusive and safe learning environment, high-quality content that involves knowledge about the emerging needs of youth, and competent educational staff must be present in all schools for individuals around the world. Converting these ideas from a macro to micro assessment perspective, these recommendations speak to the importance of assessing an individual's perception of a safe and fair environment in their educational experience.

Another macro-level approach to understanding education – especially in the United States - concerns education policy. Education policy is the plan and underlying principles that undergird student education (RAND Corporation). Within the United States, federal education policy is implemented to address issues of access, opportunity, and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Policies that address equity such as access to high-quality schools, a high-quality, evidence-based curriculum, up-to-date educational materials (e.g., new textbooks and technology), expert teachers, and individualized attention for at-risk students are policies that have often been established through civil rights cases and legislation (Darling-Hammond, 2014). By contrast, policies that address issues of achievement are those policies that directly address student learning and how student learning is measured (e.g., policies that establish learning standards in mathematics and science).

The clearest markers of policy within the U.S. are key legal cases and legislation that highlight the types of policies mentioned above. For example, perhaps the best-known example of federal educational case law is *Brown* vs. *Board of Education*, a case heard at the United States Supreme Court which argued that the school systems for Black children were of much poorer quality than those for white children, thus violating the principle of "separate but equal" established in the 14th amendment (United States Courts). Other pieces of legislation, like Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 prohibit discrimination in public schools and extracurricular activities, respectively, based on sex (Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Moreover, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit discrimination toward persons with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, n.d.; United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964 provides financial assistance to high-poverty schools to ensure that all children receive an equitable and high-quality education. Title I schools often offer additional teachers and paraprofessionals such as teachers' aides, individualized education plans, and extra professional development opportunities for teachers and support staff (United States Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). Finally, a more recent example is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. No Child Left Behind dramatically increased federal involvement in the public school system by requiring that schools administer standardized yearly reading and mathematics assessments to hold schools accountable for improving the quality of students' education (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Nolen & Duignan, 2021).

These macro level approaches address education quality at a group level, most typically using the maintenance of an equitable learning environment and measures of student achievement (most often grades and test scores) as guideposts for assessing the quality of education in schools as a whole. These data are often pooled across schools to demonstrate quality education in counties, states, and countries. From a self-assessment perceptive, this literature speaks to the importance of assessing the quality of an individual's instruction at the teacher level, the overall curriculum at the school level, and the degree to which the learning environment is equitable.

3. Conceptualizing decent education

The review presented above discusses the wide array of available approaches to assess whether education can be considered decent or of a certain quality. We draw from each of these approaches to construct a new conceptualization of *decent education* in the context of PWT. We are particularly interested in how access to decent education relates downstream to access to decent work. In developing the construct, we considered the following three criteria. First, we are primarily interested in decent education during high school. Decent education as a concept is applicable to all levels of education, but when it comes to connecting educational experiences with downstream work outcomes – especially using a PWT lens – we feel high school is the most appropriate setting to assess the construct. This is because high school is where most students begin to connect their school and work, often through participation in targeted school-to-work programs or college preparation activities. Certainly, the time from high school graduation to formally entering the workforce will vary greatly – ranging from those who enter into full-time employment immediately to those who may take another decade (or more) due to seeking advanced professional degrees. However, we contend that a) high school is a critical point where students make their initial vocational decisions which affect their long-term experiences in the workforce, and b) as opposed to

college/university, high school is a near-universal experience for adolescents in the U.S., with a current graduation rate of 86 % (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Finally, c) a pragmatic benefit of assessing decent education at the high school level is that it will allow researchers to capture more accurate retrospective data from participants, versus asking participants about their experiences in elementary or middle school.

Second, we are primarily interested in an individual's self-assessment of their education. Regardless of macro-level, external quality indicators, every individual student's experiences with their education are unique. Thus, as we define decent education, we assume that it would be assessed through individuals taking in the moment or retrospective surveys on their perception of a decent education. For example, we are primarily interested in an individual's perception of quality instruction in high school versus data available about the level of quality instruction at that school at a macro level, for all students. Third, we view decent education as a multidimensional construct that can be assessed in a parsimonious manner.

Finally, we purposely use the term "decent" regarding education – versus terms like quality or satisfactory - in the same way it is used to define decent work. *Decent* is meant to capture the idea that an individual's experience with education meets a specific threshold. Decent education does not necessarily imply excellence or distinction but rather refers to education that should be accessible and expected of all high school students. However, because of the critical importance of education in the present and future well-being of students, the threshold we use to consider education decent is multifaceted and scoping. Although this could be interpreted as overly aspirational, we strongly feel these components still represent a minimum threshold.

Based on these criteria, we conceptualize decent education as individuals' perceived educational experience in high school with six components: a) Physical safety, b) Psychological safety, c) Equitable learning environment, d) Fosters social connectedness, e) Quality instruction, and f) Provides adequate educational/vocational programming for post-high school. In the following sections, we discuss the importance of each of these components and present evidence linking these educational experiences to positive academic, psychological, and vocational outcomes.

3.1. Physical safety

Decent education exists when a student feels their learning environment is physically safe, *an environment where a student feels confident they will be protected from potential physical harm* (e.g., *physical violence, criminal violation*). The voluminous research on physical safety within high schools has demonstrated the detrimental effects of an unsafe environment on a wide array of outcomes, in addition to a greater report of physical harm. Specifically, students in physically unsafe environments attend school less frequently, avoid certain places within the school (e.g., restrooms), or even carry a weapon as self-protection to avoid being exposed to violence (Schreck & Miller, 2003). Feeling unsafe at school can also prevent students from focusing on their schoolwork, and thus their academic performance is compromised (Ripski & Gregory, 2009). Therefore, ensuring students feel physically safe to attend school is a critical first step toward decent education.

3.2. Psychological safety

Decent education exists when a student feels their learning environment is psychologically safe, *an environment where a student feels confident they will be protected from psychological harm* (e.g., *bullying, humiliation, harassment, and abuse*). Creating a safe and discrimination-free, inclusive environment is essential for promoting quality in education (UNICEF, 2000). Research has demonstrated that being exposed to bullying or punitive disciplinary action is associated with poor school adjustment, poor academic achievement, lower attendance, and higher dropout rates (Akiba, 2010; Astor et al., 2010; Glew et al., 2005; Nansel et al., 2003). Among the five components of decent work, physical and psychological safety were merged as one construct. However, for a decent education, we believe these are best viewed as separate and unique. This is because a student may feel safe from physical violence however, they may not necessarily feel completely safe at school. Psychological safety, particularly in relation to interpersonal harassment and abuse, is also essential to consider.

3.3. Equitable learning environment

Decent education exists when a student feels their learning environment is equitable. *At a minimum, a student, regardless of their background or identities, feels they are treated equally by peers, teachers, and administrators and are given equal access to resources, support, and quality instruction*. A straightforward way to assess a student's perception of their environment would understand their experiences of daily discrimination and/or unfair treatment on account of their background or identities. Students who perceived higher discrimination at school based on their race, ethnicity, and gender reported lower grades, lower academic persistence, more increased absences, lower self-esteem, and lower psychological well-being (Benner & Graham, 2011; Gale & Dorsey, 2020; Greene et al., 2006).

However, as was recommended by OECD (2012), a "one size fits all" approach to education does not meet the needs of individuals and communities from different backgrounds or abilities. For example, the achievement gap, defined as the difference in achievement level across various student groups, is a nationwide phenomenon persisting and growing in the past 30 years (Bok, 2003). Specifically, reports indicate that African American and Latino/a American students continuously showed lower achievement levels in reading and math than Asian American and White American students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2003a, 2003b). A meta-analysis on the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities showed that students with disabilities had reading levels more than 3 years below than those without disabilities (Gilmour et al., 2019). Thus, a learning environment should strive for providing not just equal but equitable opportunities for students.

Equity is more than just equality. Equity is providing additional access and resources to students with greater experiences of economic constraints and marginalization. As such, *truly equitable learning environments also seek to level the playing field for marginalized and economically constrained students*. If students perceive their learning environment as equitable, they would endorse equal treatment and also report a system that actively engages in providing opportunities for - and protecting the well-being of - disadvantaged students. An individual student in this environment who is economically constrained or marginalized would report experiencing unique opportunities and support by school personnel.

3.4. Fosters social belongingness

Decent education exists when a *student feels socially connected, builds trust with other people, and engages in social activities at school*. School belongingness – often referred to as school connectedness, engagement, and community - is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80)". Studies with high school students have demonstrated that those with a stronger social connection with their peers, teachers, and other school staff are more likely to attend school, express higher levels of well-being in general and in the school environment, and perform better academically (Gase et al., 2016; Lammers et al., 2017; Mattison & Aber, 2007; Zullig et al., 2011).

3.5. Quality instruction

Decent education exists when a student perceives the instruction they receive through their courses is of decent quality. Specifically, a *student would experience their teachers as instrumental to their learning, and this instruction would be linked with positive academic outcomes*. This component of a decent education is perhaps the most well-researched of all six components, given that it is directly tied to student learning, and assessments of student learning are most often used for determining quality education at macro levels. Studies have consistently shown that high instructional quality is positively related to student achievement and motivation (Kunter et al., 2013). Importantly, instructional quality is not just about teaching the curriculum well but is also about creating a safe and interpersonally connective classroom atmosphere. For example, when quality teachers incorporate sets of relevant norms, goals, and values in teaching and other learning activities, students can build close relationships with peers and teachers and feel safe at school (Dansby & Dansby-Giles, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013).

3.6. Adequate educational/vocational programming for post-high school

Finally, decent education exists when a *student feels their high school provides adequate programming activities for their educational and/or vocational plans post-graduation*. Students who experience this component of decent education would be able to clearly identify opportunities to engage in preparatory activities which match their desired career or educational goals post-graduation. High school is a means to an end for all students, with the next step being employment or further education. Schools should provide students with the necessary infrastructure and opportunity to seek either of these paths post-graduation. This can take the form of support to maximize success with college applications to school-to-work programs aimed at helping students secure meaningful employment immediately after graduation. When students are engaged in these types of school-to-work programs or feel supported by their school around college admissions, they report higher academic self-efficacy (Pinquart et al., 2003), higher grades, and graduation rates (Balcazar et al., 2018).

3.7. Considering all six components collectively

Akin to the five-component decent work construct, we view decent education as having been achieved when all six of these components are present based on a current (or former) student's self-assessment. However, we are aware that decent education is not an all-or-nothing construct in practice – many individuals may experience some of these components but not others. We also view the components as being part of two classes. The first four components (physical and psychological safety, equitable learning environment, social connectedness) are mainly about the school environment itself. The next two components (quality instruction and educational/vocational programming) are tangible experiences students have within the school environment that promote downstream positive work outcomes. These first four components set a necessary safe and stable foundation for students to maximally benefit from quality instruction and educational and vocational programming.

4. Placement in PWT model

As has been noted, our primary goal is to introduce the decent education concept and to center it within PWT, in particular hypothesizing how the concept may predict access to decent work across time. We believe that decent education serves as an important direct predictor of decent work and a mediator between economic constraints, experiences of marginalization, and access to decent work (Fig. 1). The model contains three distinct sections: structural factors (economic constraints, marginalization experiences), decent education, and work-related outcomes (work volition, career adaptability, decent work). We conceptualize these connecting to each other in a linear fashion, with structural factors predicting decent education attainment and decent education attainment predicting positive work outcomes across time. This is discussed in greater detail below. However, it is also important to first discuss the mechanisms that link these classes of constructs together. Or more simply, *why* is it that individuals who experience less economic

constraints or marginalization in childhood are more likely to receive decent education? And *why* does receiving decent education promote positive work-related outcomes?

We propose that the primary mechanism linking structural factors to decent education is *access to opportunity*. Specifically, individuals with greater experiences of economic constraints and marginalization during childhood will have less access to educational environments that are decent. This is the result of a U.S. school system where zoning determines public school assignment, and families who are more economically constrained and/or marginalized are less likely to live in well-funded and well-resourced school zones (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This in turn will affect an individual student's access to a specific high school where they may or may not experience the six components of decent education. We propose that the primary mechanism linking decent education with positive work-related outcomes is *career and college readiness* (Conley, 2012). This is because higher quality high school education gives students a safe place to grow their career interests and make reasonable plans for what comes after high school graduation – whether it be immediate employment, additional vocational training, or post-secondary education. By graduation, students who experience decent education feel ready for what's next. Students grow skills and knowledge that directly translate to both what they may be doing after graduation as well as how to successfully make that transition (Conley, 2010; Conley, 2012). We view the quality of one's high school education as a critical pivot point for future experiences in the world of work (Masdonati et al., 2021).

With these basic mechanisms in mind, we propose a linear set of relations where decent education acts as a mediator variable connecting structural factors to decent work access across time. Specifically, as is supported by a robust base of research (Darling-Hammond, 2010), we hypothesize that children who experience greater economic constraints and marginalization will have less access to decent education, and thus over time will likely enroll in educational environments which are not decent. These experiences will – in part – explain why being economically constrained and/or marginalized links with decreased access to decent work over time. Informed by PWT logic, we contend that structural factors related to economic constraints and experiences of marginalization are the primary drivers of an individual being in an educational environment they consider decent. However, because decent education is a micro level, individual construct, it is reasonable to expect that various other individual factors may relate to a student feeling they are experiencing decent education. We elaborate on this idea further in the next section.

We also use PWT framing to propose that a partial reason decent education promotes decent work access is due to an increased sense of choice in the world of world (work volition) and an increased capacity to adapt to changes in the world of work (career adaptability). Work volition and career adaptability each represent psychological constructs that have been strongly linked to positive vocational outcomes, including experiencing decent work among employed adult populations and having high expectations of attaining decent work among college student populations (Blustein & Duffy, 2020). Given that decent education provides access to high-quality instruction and school-to-work information which facilities career and college readiness, we hypothesize that students who obtain a more decent education will feel more choice and capacity to deal with challenges in the world of work post-graduation. This, in turn, will promote decent work attainment over time (Fig. 1). Like the structural predictors of decent education, we contend that volition and adaptability are the primary positive vocational effects of decent education that would be experienced across time, while also acknowledging that many other variables may function in this role. Namely, for the sake of highlighting the decent education construct and situating it within PWT, it limits the number of variables we propose predicting decent work to three. This of course does not capture that wide array of factors that may limit or enhance an individual's access to decent work (additional factors discussed below), but we do contend these would capture a large portion of the variance in decent work attainment.

5. A research agenda

A primary motivation for developing the new decent education concept is to advance research in this important area of scholarship, particularly concerning the link between experiences of decent education and access to decent work. In the following sections, we discuss a pathway forward for better understanding decent education empirically and the vision we have for pragmatic research on the topic.

5.1. Distinctiveness and overlap of six components

Much like the decent work concept, the six components of decent education conceptualized here come from a process of decision-making on which components to include or exclude to capture the true meaning of the construct while also being parsimonious. These decisions were made based on an extensive review of the literature across various domains and methods of assessing quality education. In some ways, this was a similar process for conceptualizing decent work. However, the ILO (1999) had already labeled the five subcomponents, and Duffy et al. (2016) merely adapted them to apply to individuals versus countries. The authors then went on to develop a scale to assess decent work using these five components (Duffy, Allan, et al., 2017), which also went through cross-cultural examination in a series of papers for a special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (Duffy, Blustein et al., 2020). These papers included a critical qualitative piece in which the researcher teams asked participants what they believed made up decent work and were able to compare these responses to the proposed five-component structure.

A similar process will be essential to support and validate the structure of this new decent education construct. From a quantitative perspective, this will involve constructing items to match each of the six components, running multiple studies to develop and validate a new instrument, and ensuring cross-cultural validity. These efforts should also be combined with qualitative methods to elucidate how individuals worldwide understand the concept. If, like decent work, the components of a decent education are believed to comprise a minimum threshold, what do individuals intuitively view as needed to meet this threshold? This foundational research may showcase some unique cultural differences, especially regarding which components are viewed as most critical to achieving decent

education.

5.2. Additional predictors of decent education

The placement of decent education within the PWT model (See Fig. 1) offers a parsimonious picture of – what we contend – are the primary predictors of access to decent education: economic constraints and marginalization experiences. However, these two structural predictor variables in no way encapsulate the wide array of constructs that likely inform an individual's perception that they currently have, or had obtained, decent education. In this next section, we draw from existing research on quality education to propose additional variables that may be important predictors. Each of these also represent targets of research for scholars who wish to test more elaborate PWT models.

Perhaps the most well-studied construct within the context of adolescent educational experience is social support. This represents one of the core components of the decent education construct within school (Fosters social belongingness), but support received from outside of the school environment may also be important. For example, studies have shown that parents' play important roles in impacting students' educational experiences, including adjustment in school and academic success (Barnard, 2004; Roberts, 2007). Parents more involved with their children's school, who assist their children in navigating their work and school, and who provide a more positive home environment can facilitate more positive in school experiences (Fantuzzo & Tighe, 2000; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Shumox & Lomax, 2001). Other studies have focused on support received from friends and the community at large. For example, studies have shown that peer support and positive peer norms can facilitate more participation in school-related activities, increase motivation, and promote achievement and more involvement in school among youth (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001; Crosnoe et al., 2003). Moreover, studies have shown that community-based organizations and community-based youth-focused programs have helped youth foster a sense of hopefulness, empowerment, and agency and facilitate positive adjustment post-school (McLaughlin, 2000; Zimmerman et al., 2018).

Other predictors of decent education may revolve more around characteristics of the students themselves, namely variables related to personality and motivation. For example, in the original PWT, Duffy et al. (2016) suggest that individuals with a more proactive personality may be better able to achieve decent work despite structural constraints. Proactive personality is defined as "a disposition toward taking personal initiative to influence one's environment (p. 395; Li et al., 2010)." Studies have shown that proactive personality is related to students' academic self-efficacy in education (Lin et al., 2014), career decision-making self-efficacy (Mujiati & Salim, 2021), and academic engagement (Chen et al., 2021). In an educational context, a proactive personality may be a key predictor because it concerns one's ability to affect change in their environment. As such, proactive students in poor educational environments may be more likely to seek out ways to more those environments better for themselves.

Relatedly, student motivation, particularly toward longer term career goals, may affect how students experience their education. Career motivation is a multidimensional construct that consists of career resilience, career insight, and career identity (London, 1983). Career resilience is the ability to adapt to changing situations even when the situation is challenging. It consists of characteristics such as belief in self, willingness to take risks, and need for achievement. Career insight is the ability to be realistic about one's career and consists of establishing clear, feasible career goals and realizing one's strengths and weaknesses. Career identity is the extent that one defines oneself by one's work. Career motivation has been shown to be positively associated with the need for learning, self-determination, self-efficacy, and achievement (Lazarides et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2017). Like proactive personality, we suspect that students who are more motivated to achieve goals after high school will be more likely maximize positive experiences in high school. For example, these students may be more assertive around enrolling in vocational and/or college preparation courses. Additionally, when choices are available, career motived students may be more likely to seek out higher quality instruction.

In sum, we identified three additional constructs that may promote a stronger experience of decent education among students: social support, proactive personality, and career motivation. It will be fascinating to see results from initial research that attempts to understand how factors such as these, along with the core structural constructs, collectively predict decent education perceptions.

5.3. Additional outcomes of decent education

Akin to the predictors of decent education, we positioned several proposed outcomes of decent education which directly overlapped with the original PWT model: career adaptability, work volition, and decent work. However, these also do not encapsulate the wide variety of outcomes that may result from attaining decent education nor the wide array of reasons why decent education may link to decent work specifically.

First and foremost, access to decent education is not important just for an individual's eventual work life. Research has demonstrated that securing higher quality education is linked to a wide variety of health and well-being outcomes. For example, studies have shown that positive school experiences are directly related to students' mental health including levels of depression, self-esteem, loneliness, and physical health (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Reddy et al., 2003; Roeser et al., 2000). This accumulation of research suggests the value of studying more broad outcomes of decent education as scholars seek to expand beyond PWT-informed constructs.

Second, when considering the precise reasons why access to decent education may link to decent work access, there are certainly more explanatory mechanisms than an increase in volition and adaptability. For example, the decency of education is likely to predict whether or not students even finish high school (Zaff et al., 2017). Those who experience the education they receive as decent, and therefore positive, are more likely to complete high school. High school completion is an important predictor of the quality of work one gets, as a high school diploma can work as a gauge of qualification for employers (Greene & Winters, 2001). Beyond the diploma itself, the impact that decent education has on an individual's vocational preparation is likely vast, as education helps students attain

resources that are directly and indirectly related to future work experiences.

Another potential explanatory variable is access to social capital. This variable is directly connected to the social belongingness component of decent education, but decent education is likely to also positively impact social capital post high school, linking eventually to decent work attainment. Social capital is defined as "the good will that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action (p.17, Adler & Kwon, 2002)." This "goodwill" refers to the trustworthiness, forgiveness, and empathy that is offered by the relationships one forms. The more students feel connected and belonged to the educational community they are in (i.e., receive decent education), the more they will build social capital that extends beyond high school. This social capital would likely sustain after graduation and lead to better outcomes post-graduation including attaining decent work. For example, studies have shown that social capital helps one's job search (Lin et al., 2006), yields positive employment outcomes (Mouw, 2003; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2005), and positively influences one's career success (Gabby & Zuckerman, 1998).

In sum, we identified several additional constructs that may be outcomes of decent education and several new potential mediators that may explain the link between decent education and decent work. Decent education not only yields positive psychological resources (i.e., work volition and career adaptability) but also may boost general well-being and access to social capital.

5.4. Future research and pragmatic suggestions

The avenues for assessing how decent education links to decent work are limitless. However, we want to suggest several future research directions and highlight several pragmatic suggestions for scholars wishing to understand the connections between these constructs. First, it will be essential to develop an instrument or assessment tool of decent education that is cross-culturally applicable, as cultural context is an indispensable factor in understanding vocational trajectory (Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Savickas & Walsh, 1996). To do so, cross-national collaborations among vocational psychologists are recommended as this process will facilitate an emic and etic understanding of how decent education is understood and may impact the attainment of decent work.

Second, researchers should continue to study decent education despite the lack of an appropriate measurement tool, as the development of such an instrument will take years to unfold properly. This is especially the case regarding the time it would take to gather longitudinal data. The work of Diemer and colleagues (Diemer, 2009; Diemer et al., 2010) has demonstrated how to utilize preexisting, longitudinal data sets to explore relations between educational and vocational variables across time. Granted, these types of datasets would not perfectly capture decent education and work as fully conceptualized here, but are likely to contain components of these constructs that would be valuable to examine across time. Moreover, we recommend researchers be open to measuring decent education both in the present (from current high school students) and retrospectively. The value of gathering data in the present is paramount; however, collecting data from minors is challenging logistically. It almost always requires building partnerships with schools, going through more complicated IRB processes, finding creative ways to have students actually fill out surveys, and needing parental approval. As such, we recommend researchers be open to asking participants to retrospect on their high school experiences about the six components of decent education. This will efficiently open avenues of research, especially when surveying college students and young adults whose experiences in high school are relatively recent. Many studies have begun to explore a similar idea with decent work, assessing the likelihood young adults feel of attaining it in the future (Kim et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2021). We believe the same idea has validity for decent education, focusing instead on past experiences.

Third, it will be essential to investigate the role of decent education in the broader PWT context as suggested in this paper. It was not included in the original PWT model, and as such, its position within that framework requires evaluation. Particularly, future studies would need to assess the relative importance of decent education in predicting decent work versus other theoretically – or non-theoretically – implied predictor variables. Although we assume that decent education mediates the relation of structural factors on downstream outcomes such as decent work, the strength of these effects remains unknown. Additionally, it will be interesting to examine how these effects change as people develop. For example, perhaps decent education is highly relevant to decent work access in early adulthood, with that relevance dwindling over time as people move further away from late adolescence. Or, perhaps that effect remains constant, given the potentially critical role decent education play in workforce entry. These are just several of many questions to examine regarding the role of decent education in more complex models.

Fourth, we suggest that scholars make efforts to design their studies to be longitudinal in nature. The connection between decent education and decent work is naturally temporal and will only unfold over many years. This type of research is the gold standard for research on work attitudes (Van Montfort et al., 2017), but we also acknowledge the logistical difficulties that exist in gathering data from people at multiple time points. The vast majority of research on decent work over the last five years has been cross-sectional, which is typical for a newly developed construct, with a handful of more recent studies using longitudinal methods (Allan et al., 2020; Duffy, Kim, et al., 2020). However, even these studies have been conducted over relatively short time spans of less than one year. As such, although many researchers may choose to conduct initial research on decent education in a cross-sectional manner, we recommend gathering participant identification and contact information to at least allow the possibility of follow-up studies in the world of work.

Finally, we suggest that scholars explore and expand on the theoretical model presented in this paper. We have provided additional predictors and outcomes of decent education above that have not been incorporated into the model. Through the process of examining the hypothesized relations among structural factors, decent education, psychological mediators, and decent work in the long run, scholars may find essential mediators and moderators which could be added to the model.

6. Conclusion

The current conceptual paper sought to introduce the concept of decent education, specifically as it applies to linkages with access to decent work. Drawing from a series of existing frameworks looking at micro and macro indices of quality education, we proposed a six-component decent education construct, where each component is necessary for education to meet the threshold to be considered decent. We hope this new construct will be of use to vocational psychologists interested in understanding predictors of decent work, where an individual's educational experience is often integral to future career prospects.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ryan Duffy: Writing, editing, conceptualization, project administration
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Gianella Perez: Writing
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Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no conflict of interest for the publication.

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