

Success for People with Disabilities after Postsecondary Education  
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**Abstract:** Success may be defined in numerous ways and may be linked to quality of life. Individuals with disabilities often find success difficult to achieve. Postsecondary education has been shown to improve individual quality of life. Does a professional life obtained through postsecondary education provide individuals with disabilities entree to a better quality of life? How does this play out in the life of a person with a disability? This study reports on interviews with both people with and without disabilities and their perceptions of both success and quality of life. The findings stress how important it is to facilitate access and support in the pursuit of a postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities.

**Key Words:** quality of life, individuals with disabilities, postsecondary education

### Introduction

Success is a concept that may be linked to the quality of ones life. When one reaches a level of accomplishment in life, ones quality of life may increase because of a sense of achievement, and one may have right of entry to opportunities previously off limits. Indicators, such as financial independence, a pleasurable working environment, employment with a prestigious company, or enjoying a healthy, happy family life may define "success" for different individuals. For people with disabilities, just as for people without disabilities, achievement of success and thus an enhanced quality of life is partly dependent on self-determination. Wehmeyer (1996, p. 24) describes a definitional framework in which self-determination refers to "acting as the primary causal agent in ones life and making choices and decisions regarding ones quality of life free from undue external influence or interference." Concepts of success have generated a substantial amount of discussion in research literature. Studies have focused on success by examining numerous categories including successful businessmen, successful female executives, and successful black women as well as various achievement-related factors. What is success and how does one determine when it has been achieved? Further, how does this relate to people with disabilities and the quality of their lives? There has been comparatively little research on success relevant to the personal and professional lives of individuals with disabilities and the subsequent effects upon their quality of life.

What is quality of life? Quality of life is a concept that exists without a concrete, agreed upon definition. Is it contingent on some level with economic status, education, physical health and functional ability, or mental and emotional well-being? Is it having a

loving family, friends, freedom and being self-determined? Might quality of life be seen as what people do with their free time, where and how they participate in recreation and leisure? Or is quality of life some combination of these factors; a subjective appraisal made by each individual about whether he or she is truly happy and satisfied with life and its opportunities? Does having a disability make achieving a high quality of life more or less difficult? Scholars and practitioners are challenged by the task of studying these questions.

While quality of life (QOL) has no single uniform definition (O'Boyle, 1997) it is closely related to success and has received attention as of late. One definition of QOL is: "A general wellbeing synonymous with overall life satisfaction, happiness, contentment or success" (Stark & Goldsbury, 1990). Taylor and Bogdan (1990) believe the concept of QOL has no meaning apart from what a person feels and experiences. Furthermore, people may evaluate the same experiences differently. What enhances one person's quality of life may detract from another's. Some may see having children as a welcome addition to their lives while others may see the responsibility as a burden. Goode (1990) thought a higher quality of life to be more likely when an individual, with or without disabilities, is able to meet needs in major life settings (work, school, community, home) as well as satisfy the normative expectations that others hold for them in those settings. When one is able to consistently produce superior work as well as form successful relationships at the workplace, then one is able to obtain a higher quality of life in this life setting. Goode also echoed Maslow's (2003) hierarchy of needs stating an enhanced QOL is experienced when a person's basic needs are being met and when he or she has the opportunity to pursue and achieve goals in major life settings.

Current and ongoing research in this area identifies eight core quality of life dimensions (Schalock, 1996a):

- emotional well-being
- interpersonal relationships
- material well-being
- personal development
- physical well-being
- self-determination
- social inclusion, and
- individual rights.

These eight core dimensions vary slightly among investigators but are based on the work of Cummings (1997), Felce (1997), Hughes and Hwang (1996), Parmenter and Donnelly (1997), and Renwick and Brown (1996). There is an emerging consensus, when referring to these eight core dimensions that each person values them differently, and the value attached to each varies across ones life (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). Therefore success, and consequently quality of life, regardless of ability, occurs when a person's needs and desires are experienced with some control and meaning in their environment.

Persons with disabilities often find success difficult to achieve. It is plausible that some variables that effect success are locus of control, communication skills (accommodated and not accommodated), socioeconomic status, type of disability and when disability occurred (at birth or later on in life), social supports, community involvement, history of employment and range of settings/responsibilities (Schalock, Keith, Hoffman & Karan, 1989). According to Sands and Wehmeyer (1996), “Most people with disabilities who are living, working and participating in the community have stories about the obstacles that they have overcome to achieve a personal degree of independence” (pp. 15). This is similar for people without disabilities, but people with disabilities have more obstacles in their way, i.e. discrimination, stigma, stereotypes, etc. Furthermore, a person’s relative self-determination is a strong predictor of his or her quality of life: People who are highly self-determined have a higher quality of life, and people who lack self-determination have a less positive quality of life (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). Those with a higher quality of life should have substantial freedom and dignity and be actualizing his/her potential to achieve maximum independence, self-acceptance, and social acceptance (Felce & Perry, 1995). However, persons with disabilities continually encounter forms of discrimination in many facets of life including postsecondary education and employment that may be barriers to self-determination.

Gretzel, Briel and Kregel (2002a) present obstacles people with disabilities face, including negative employer attitudes, architectural barriers, and lack of necessary services and supports, when attempting to access employment or pursue their careers. Further barriers people with disabilities face are lack of work experience opportunities, networking skills, and job-seeking skills. Additionally, they can lack information about available careers, knowledge on how to identify what modifications are necessary to perform a job, and knowledge on how to request needed modifications from an employer (Gretzel, Briel & Kregel, 2002b). These factors, which hinder a person with a disability from being successful in life, also affect that person’s quality of life. For these reasons, it is critical to provide greater opportunities for inclusion and choice, employment, living in a residence of ones choice, and social integration (Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996).

A central issue when examining definitions and descriptions of success and QOL is the discrepancy between subjective and objective criteria. Subjective refers to the individual’s point of view whereas objective refers to the societal point of view. Subjective and objective criteria are akin to concepts of internal and external locus of control as elements of self-determination. While there may be no definitive classification for “quality of life” (Dennis et al., 1993) researchers agree that any assessment for quality of life is essentially subjective (Blatt, 1987; Edgerton 1990; Schalock, 1990; Taylor & Racino, 1991). One may assume another person has a high quality of life by observing where they live or if they have a prestigious job, but the person observed may not feel those material trappings contribute to a superior lifestyle. They may compare themselves to another with even more material wealth and feel they are truly lacking. Therefore, because quality of life is something experienced subjectively by the individual, the individual’s perspective must be the primary focus of any study of quality of life (Taylor & Bogdan, 1996; Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001).

Education is considered one way to empowerment and a higher quality of life. Statistically significant relationships between disability, level of education, and employment outcomes have been established (Benz, Doren & Yovanoff, 1998). Employment rates for people with disabilities are closely related to their level of education (Stodden & Dowrick, 1999/2000). The rate of unemployment for individuals with disabilities has hovered at around 70% for the past 12 years (New Freedom Initiative, 2001). Even with a postsecondary education, only 50% of individuals with disabilities are employed (Swenson & Richards, 1999). Despite these horrendous employment statistics, for people with disabilities, overcoming obstacles encountered in postsecondary education and graduating from college can be a major accomplishment and a significant step towards controlling his/her environment and ultimately obtaining a higher quality of life.

Why would anyone attempt to study the elusive concept of success and quality of life? Perhaps because one of the most significant changes recently in the study of QOL has been the shift toward quality-of-life oriented, outcome-based evaluation rooted in person-referenced outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). This development, from the sometimes ambiguous and subjective study of QOL to the more structured results orientated study, has focused the field of study upon the effects on the people being studied. According to Halpern (1993), the purpose of measuring quality of life is to assist people to establish an enhanced standard of living and lifestyle.

### Research Questions

1. Does a professional life obtained through postsecondary education give people with disabilities access to a better quality of life?
2. What does it mean/look like for a person with a disability to have a positive quality of life experience?
3. Is this the same meaning/picture of quality of life as for a person without a disability?

### Method

Some researchers believe that quality of life, by its very nature, is an individually unique and subjective concept that defies objective measurement and demands qualitative approaches (Edgerton, 1990). Qualitative methods offer significant advantages to the understanding of such poly-dimensional human experiences as the one being studied (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988).

In-depth interviews explored the thoughts of people with and without disabilities about success. Qualitative interviews offered a number of advantages when compared with quantitative surveys of the target population. First, they allowed members of the target population to express their ideas in a spontaneous manner not entirely structured according to the researcher's prejudices (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992). Participants were free to volunteer information on points important to them, or which the researcher

may not have anticipated. Second, such interviews provide more in-depth insights into how people felt about specific issues, and more importantly, why they felt this way.

Successful professional people were identified and approached to serve as participants. Purposeful sampling began with people with disabilities who have successfully negotiated postsecondary education, are employed, and who were known to the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii, Manoa. Professionals in the field of human service management identified additional research subjects. Four people with disabilities were matched to four similarly employed people without disabilities.

Interviews took place over lunch or dinner. They lasted up to two hours. Selected informants revealed and described both objective and subjective quality of life indicators. Using the same indicators of objective quality of life indicators and subjective probe questions enhanced the reliability of the study.

With the permission of the interviewee, all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken on relevant information, verbal and non-verbal. The data was entered and analyzed with the help of a computer software program for qualitative data analysis, NVivo. This enhanced the reliability of the analysis process by recording an audit trail of the findings (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Richards & Richards, 1994). The researcher analyzed the transcripts and notes carefully, finding themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Results were offered to informants for feedback and participants were able to validate or refute the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions (Kotre, 1984; Stiles, 1993; Lincoln & Guba; 1985). Testimonial validity was achieved in all themes.

### Significant Findings

The findings of this study could be classified in three different theme areas; themes by ability, themes by gender and common themes (Table 1).

Table 1: Themes

<b>By Ability</b>	<b>By Gender</b>	<b>Common</b>
PWDs –More self reliant	W- Mentoring important for themselves	Post secondary education as credential
PWDs-Control and choice more important	W- Important to mentor others	Family support important
PWDs-Rated higher by others	M- Life spheres overlap	Determination
PWDs- Career plans altered by outside	W- Vision M- Goal setting	Making a difference

		Work/family balance/not having enough time
<b>Key PWDs- People with Disabilities W- Women M- Men</b>		Post secondary education as building block, giver of opportunity

Research participants related their experience of quality of life through the findings and the themes. A postsecondary education contributed to participants with disabilities' sense of ability and their self-concept of success. This is a demonstration of person referenced outcomes of quality of life. Gender is a highly personal issue and interacting with disability affected the success of women with disabilities in this study. Finally, there were some common findings among participants with and without disabilities who attended postsecondary education and were now practicing human service professionals. Postsecondary education in and of itself is seen as a credential, a building block for future development by all. These professionals also recognized that their success was due in part to family support, but it continued to be a challenge for all to balance professional life and family responsibilities. All participants needed great personal commitment to complete their education.

#### Themes Varied By Presence of a Disability

Successful people with disabilities in our study appear more self-reliant and see themselves as an agent of change in their own lives, more so than their non-disabled counterparts. It seems they realize they must determine what they want and how to get it:

“...And again because of my disability, even though I can bend down and pick something up on the floor, if I drop a piece of paper and I need it, and I need it bad enough I will find someone to pick it up for me. So much of it depends on the need or priority.”

“Well, I think the education alone or the combination of the education and the professional has given me the self-confidence to make me feel like I could conquer the world. I can get married, I can have kids, and I can run away and live in a tropical island in the Pacific. I can do anything I want because I have confidence that I'll land on my feet...”

Related to this last finding is the issue of control and choice, which seems to be more important for research subjects with disabilities than for non-disabled research subjects. This indicates that people with disabilities appear to need to strive harder and be more self-reliant in achieving success. Again, this reinforces the fact that quality of life is tied to self-determination. Self-determination is important for everyone, but in this study it was more important for people with disabilities. (PWDs):

“I think it’s a matter of how you perceive yourself and how you perceive your environment. And so if you perceptually change that and you start to create action steps then you can have tremendous amounts of control. But a lot of times people don’t want control because with control comes responsibility.”

“I realized that no matter where your path takes you, from that point, wherever you are, you have an infinite set of choices, even though the ones behind you were limited.”

“There was a pervasive attitude there, that ‘you get on with it’ that I think really stood me on good stead.”

Some people with disabilities in this study felt highly regarded by others. They indicated these opinions are sometimes exaggerated, which made them feel they were being overvalued. This suggests that while non-disabled people are aware of the obstacles persons with disabilities face, they may feel the need to be over complimentary. PWDs in this study felt that others would overestimate the effect of their disability on their lives and that their successes and small achievements in their life were over inflated:

“There are a few people...who just have this total inflated notion of who I am, they think I walk on water and everything I do is a miracle...”

“I say this because I’ve been told by a number of people...I think people give me way more credit than I deserve.”

Other misconceptions had detrimental effects on people with disabilities and their careers. Both women with disabilities had career plans altered by someone with influence and a limited view of disability:

“I had wanted to go into some type of medical profession and I was told that I couldn’t do that...just forget that.”

“My high school guidance counselor did not know any better and it was just like you were told ‘no you can’t do that, no nursing school would take you, no medical school would take you’...and then when I got the master’s degree in counseling, it was like well, it’s the easiest thing to do...”

### Themes Varied By Gender

The women spoke of how mentoring helped in their success. All the women had someone to call a mentor, who they could go to for advice and/or encouragement and who was a role model:

“I would tell someone nowadays to get a mentor. Find someone to teach you the ropes...that will stick with you because I think that’s what worked for me- finding a couple of people I could always count on to be there.”

“Someone who never says ‘I can’t’ or ‘You can’t’...I would advise people to look for someone who is genuinely interested in who they are on the inside and what they have to offer on the inside...”

The women also spoke of the importance of mentoring others:

“I think I feel successful when...I have had an opportunity to mentor and ...watch them go on to bigger and better things. And they come back to me and say, ‘Oh that was so useful and I learned so much.’ That feels wonderful.”

“Success is...being able to mentor people and help them see themselves as leaders in the field.”

Mentoring is a changing concept. All people have peer relationships that are valuable as supports both professionally and personally. Most people have role models who they aspire to be like. Advisors are more formal relationships that assist people in making decisions and choices. But the most formal is a mentoring relationship. Originally, this was a relationship between an older adult and a younger person designed to teach the younger person about the world. It was assumed to be long lasting. More current applications of the mentoring role include mentors for specific tasks in employment and schooling (Whelley, Radtke, Burgstahler & Christ, 2003).

Men mentioned the overlapping of personal and professional lives more than the women did:

“In a sense, my personal success is pretty much in my professional side, so it’s made everything much more...It’s made me able to succeed professionally, which makes me more satisfied personally.”

“There is a real merge of what I do socially, personally- they are all interrelated.”

Women and men agreed that it is important to have a plan. The women emphasized a vision while men thought having a plan would be key to achieving their goals: “It is good to have an idea, a vision, of where you would like to go.”

In a slightly different way, men talked about goal setting: “It is important to set goals for yourself and be able to meet those goals.”

Common Themes



Most participants felt that credentials earned were a large part of the importance of postsecondary education. It is a societal standard that demonstrates a level of ability and can open the door to further possibilities:

“It gives you a basic framework for someone to realize maybe there is a common body of knowledge that you share with others in the profession.”

“I guess I’d say that from the standpoint of being taken seriously, ...it’s like who you are, where did you go to school, what’s your background, what experience have you had, what makes you worthy of doing this type of job.”

Family support was also common to all our successful professionals:

“My family was extremely supportive during the time I was growing up...”

“Those were all fundamental necessities in terms of my being able to accomplish what I had accomplished. Family is probably the foremost variable, strong parental support, a lot of people coming to bat for you when you require help.”

All of our participants showed a high level of determination. They kept trying despite various setbacks in their lives:

“The things that led to success? For one, sheer determination to succeed.”

Perhaps because of their field of study, the human services management field, all were interested in making a difference:

“The other part of personal success is feeling like I can help make the world a better place.”

“Professional success means that the activities I do on my job or in my job has impact, there are outcomes and there are impacts on the kinds of systems that I work with.”

All participants indicated a struggle for balance in their lives and the feeling of not having enough time:

“Well, I’m struggling with work/family balance; I guess right now at this time in my life, I feel most successful when I’m not feeling torn apart by struggling with this balance.”

“I think I’ve been talking about, I’d like to be more diversified, and I’d have more time to do social things...”

All participants saw postsecondary education as a foundation on which to build their lives and a great opportunity to broaden their worldview:

“I think it was Einstein who said that ‘as the circle of light expands so does the circumference of darkness’ so the more we know, the more we realize we don’t know and so that the knowledge that we gain, more and more knowledge, whatever it is that we gain, creates this change in terms of how we see things, how we perceive our world, how we perceive others, how we perceive ourselves, so sure, expansion of knowledge is going to create changes all over the place.”

“I think it’s broadened my knowledge. I mean, lots of times skills are transferable, what you use in business and what you use in your professional, take people skills, or counseling skills, you might learn in your profession, but it goes a long way.”

#### Limitations/Suggestions for Future Research

The findings in this study come from a very small group and cannot be generalized widely. The scope of this study could be expanded to include more diverse people, especially those who are culturally diverse, adding another dimension to compare themes. Additionally, a comparison study done on the themes of those with postsecondary educations and those without would allow for further contrast. As a final limitation, the study was limited to Hawaii and to the field of human resource management.

For future research an interesting possibility would be to identify others close to those interviewed about their perspectives on the already identified successful case study and to do more of a complete case study. This could be expanded to an ethnographic study, observing the subjects at home and work and drawing conclusions from the combination of the perspectives. These methods would give depth to the findings and add validity to the subjects' reports.

#### Discussion

In each angle of analysis there were clear and common themes. People with disabilities are not so different from those without in their determinants of success. But they do see themselves as more self-reliant and as being rated higher by others. Having control and choice was clearly a theme for people with disabilities, yet did not emerge as a theme for those without disabilities. Another unique theme for people with disabilities was having their career plans altered by someone with influence and negative view of being disabled.

Postsecondary education appears to make a difference for people with disabilities. The major finding in this research was that postsecondary education makes more of a difference in quality of life for those with disabilities than for those without in regard to employment. Having success in one milestone in life, i.e. postsecondary education, may pave the way for further success in an array of outcomes: employment, status, sense of accomplishment and productivity. It was also found that completion of a postsecondary education was not as much of an expectation for those with disabilities as for those without disabilities. For this reason, self-determination and other self directed skills should be taught for all, but especially those with disabilities, and should begin as early in high school. Once on a college campus, supportive access to postsecondary education for those with disabilities must be provided.

The theme area of gender also proved interesting. Women thoroughly believed one reason for their success was being mentored and mentoring others. As mentoring changes in today's society, opportunities for being mentored and mentoring should become part of the movement to include diverse peoples. Both genders talked about the importance of having a plan, but the women talked more broadly and philosophically, about having a vision and dreams, whereas men talked more about concrete goal-setting.

Themes common to all levels of analysis were also found. Postsecondary education was seen as a credential in American society almost necessary to be successful. Credentials are seen as being important in themselves but also as a strong foundation. Higher education has opened avenues to millions of Americans. Students with disabilities must be provided the same opportunities and access as their non-disabled peers. The importance of family support is also unambiguous. All of our interviewees listed their families, both birth families and created families as a determinant of their success. Support can also come from elsewhere (disability service providers, friends, etc.) and seems to be most effective when there is a triangle of support (Whelley & Graf, 2003) with the family, disability support providers and the student all working toward the shared goal of a college education for the student. All of those studied pointed to their own determination as a reason for their success. Another commonality was the goal of making a difference in the world. This may be because of the more socially conscious group (human service professionals) chosen for the study. Not surprisingly, all participants felt there was not enough time to do all they would like to do and to achieve a balance between work and family. Post-secondary education was clearly seen as a building block on which to begin the road to success. Overall, definitions of success need to be more encompassing. For individuals with disabilities, barriers need to be recognized and removed. As shown in this study, postsecondary education opportunities may make a difference in the success of people with disabilities and contribute to their quality of life.

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