Success for People with Disabilities after Postsecondary Education

Audience

Students with disabilities, high school counselors and post-secondary institutions.

Issue

Success for people with disabilities is part of a bigger picture, self-competence and self-determination. Education is thought to be one such way to empowerment and a higher quality of life. It has clearly been established that there are statistically significant relationships between disability, level of education, and employment outcomes (Benz, Doren & Yovanoff, 1998). For people with disabilities, overcoming the obstacles of post-secondary education and graduating from college can be a major accomplishment and step towards controlling his/her environment. Does a profession obtained through postsecondary education give people with disabilities access to a better quality of life?

It is conceivable that some variables that effect success are: locus of control, communication skills, socioeconomic status, type of disability, social supports, community involvement, history of employment and range of responsibilities (Schalock, Keith, Hoffman & Karan, 1989). Those with a high rated quality of life should have substantial freedom and dignity, actualize his/her potential to achieve maximum independence, self-acceptance, and be socially accepted (Felce & Perry, 1995). This should be critical for people with disabilities, who continually encounter forms of discrimination in many facets of life such as postsecondary education and employment.

Research Questions

1. Does a profession obtained through postsecondary education give people with disabilities access to a better quality of life?

2. What does it mean for a person with a disability to have a quality of life experience?

3. Is this the same as for a person without a disability?
Method

Liu (1976) stated that there were as many quality of life definitions as people, emphasizing the axiom that individuals differ in what they find important. For this reason, it was important to use in depth qualitative research methods. Qualitative research offers significant advantages to understanding poly-dimensional human experience being studied. Case studies were used to describe both people with disabilities and those without, on their respective thoughts on success.

Permission for research on human subjects was obtained from The Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. An experienced interviewer using the same list of objective quality of life indicators and subjective probe questions performed the interviews.

The informants were disabled or non-disabled employees who had successfully negotiated post secondary education. Successful professionals were identified and approached. Four people with and four without disabilities were matched who worked in human service management. Selected informants revealed and described both their objective and subjective quality of life indicators.

All interviews were recorded (with the permission of the interviewee) and transcribed with notes taken on relevant verbal and non-verbal information. The researcher analyzed the transcripts and notes carefully, finding themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss; 1967, Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Computer software for qualitative data analysis, NVivo, was used to enhance the reliability of the analysis process by recording an audit trail of the findings. (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Richards & Richards, 1994).

Results were offered to the informants for feedback (testimonial validity) to validate or refute the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions (Kotre, 1984; Stiles, 1993; Lincoln & Guba; 1985.)

Significant Findings

Study Status: The interviews have been preliminarily analyzed. Findings include:

Themes Varied By Ability:

> Successful people with disabilities in our study seem more reliant on self and see themselves as an agent of change in their own lives, than their non disabled counterparts.

“…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, the issue of control and choice seems to be more important for people with disabilities in this study.

“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.”

People with disabilities feel that they are highly rated by others. Some feel that they are overvalued.

“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.”

Both of the women with disabilities had career plans altered by someone on the outside and their 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 their success.

“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 are genuinely interested in who they are on the inside and what they have to offer on the inside…”

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.”

Men mentioned overlapping personal and professional life spheres as being more important than for women.
“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 (first quote) a vision and the men (second quote) emphasized goal setting.

- “It is good to have an idea, a vision, of where you would like to go.”

- “It is important to set goals for yourself and be able to meet those goals.”

**Common themes:**

- Most felt that the importance of postsecondary education was the credentials earned.

- “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, … its 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 of 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 success stories showed a high level of determination.

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

- “Persistence.”

- Those in 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 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 building block to opportunity, and an 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.”

Implications

- Postsecondary education seems to make a difference of people with disabilities. Current and supportive access must be provided.
- Self-determination and other self directed skills should be taught to all, but especially to those with disabilities beginning in high school.
- Women with disabilities realized the importance of mentoring and were more willing to do the same for others.
- Opportunities should be included in postsecondary education for those with disabilities and diverse backgrounds.
- If students with disabilities do not have supportive families, that support needs to come from somewhere else (selves, disability service providers, etc.)

Contact Information

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