Success for People with Disabilities after Postsecondary Education

Success for people with disabilities is part of a bigger picture, self-competence and self-determination. Success is in the eye of the beholder. Success may be making a great deal of money, enjoying work, working for a prestigious company, or having a happy and healthy family. The concept of success has generated quite a bit of literature. Studies on success have focused upon businessmen, successful female executives, black women. However, there has been little research on success relevant to the professional and personal lives of individuals with disabilities.

Quality of life (QOL)—a closely related issue to success—has received more attention. Quality of life has been defined as a general well being that is synonymous with overall life satisfaction, happiness, contentment or success (Stark & Goldsbury, 1990) Taylor and Bogdan (1990) believe that the concept of QOL has no meaning apart from what the person feels and experiences. People may experience the same circumstances differently. What enhances one person’s quality of life may detract from another’s. Brown et al (1988) thought that quality of life could be viewed as the discrepancy between a person’s achieved and unmet needs and desires. It can also be viewed as the extent to which one has control over their environment. Parmenter (1988) believed it was the degree to which an individual has met his/her needs to create their own meanings so they can establish and sustain a viable self in the social world. Goode (1990) thought a higher quality of life was 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. Goode also reported that a high 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.

It’s conceivable that some variables that may effect success are: locus of control, communication skills, socioeconomic status, type of disability, social supports, community involvement, history of employment and range of settings/responsibilities (Schalock, Keith, Hoffman & Karan, 1989). Those with a higher quality of life should have substantial freedom and dignity, be actualizing his/her potential to achieve
independence, self-acceptance, and social acceptance (Felce & Perry, 1995). This appears to be critical for people with disabilities as they continually encounter forms of discrimination in most facets of life including postsecondary education and employment.

A central issue upon examining such definitions is the discrepancy between subjective and objective criteria for defining and describing quality of life. Subjective would refer to the individual’s point of view and objective refers to the societal point of view. It does seem while there may be no single definition of quality of life (Dennis et al, 1993) researchers seemed to have agreed that any assessment of quality of life is essentially subjective (Blatt, 1987; Edgerton 1990; Schalock, 1990; Taylor & Rocino, 1991).

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.

Why then, would any one attempt to study such an elusive concept? According to Halpern (1993) the purposes of measuring quality of life form either an objective or subjective perspective is to help a person establish as high of quality of life as possible.

**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.”

<p>| Table 1: Themes |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <strong>By Ability</strong>  | <strong>By Gender</strong>   | <strong>Common</strong>       |
| 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 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PWDs- career plans altered by outside</th>
<th>W- vision</th>
<th>Making a difference</th>
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<td>M- goal setting</td>
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<td>Work/ Family Balance-Not having enough time</td>
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<td>Post secondary education as building block, giver of opportunity</td>
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**Key:**
PWDs- People with Disabilities  
W- Women  
M- Men

**Limitations /Suggestions for future research**

The findings in this study are from a limited sample size and are not widely generalizable. The scope of this study could be expanded to include more diverse cultures. This would add another dimension for comparison of those with and those without postsecondary education.

An interesting possibility, to increase the case study is to include those close to the original interviewees. (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

**Discussion**

Postsecondary education appears to make a difference for people with disabilities. For this reason, self-determination and other self directed skills should be taught as early as high school.

This study showed that women with disabilities recognized the importance of mentoring and were willing to provide those services to others.

This study further indicated the importance of family support. All listed family as a determinant to their success. Support can also come from disability service providers and friends, leading to a triangle of support (Whelley & Graf, in press).

Overall, definitions of success need to be more encompassing of diversity. For individuals with disabilities, barriers need to be recognized and removed. As shown in this study, supporting postsecondary education opportunities can make a difference in the success of people with disabilities.

**References**


