Quality of Life after Postsecondary Education for People with Disabilities

Statement of the Problem

Interest in quality of life studies began in the 1960s when sociologists took an interest in investigating life satisfaction in the United States. Hornquist defines quality of life as the degree of needs and satisfaction within the physical, psychological, social, activity, material and structural areas.

Quality of life issues for people with disabilities are part of a bigger picture, including self-competence and self-determination. Self-competence is complex, multidimensional and has been associated with a range of constructs: locus of control, self-efficacy, self-regulation, autonomy, learned helplessness, mastery motivation, empowerment and quality of life (Powers, Singer and Sowers, 1996, p. 10). Self-determination is defined as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 24). Practitioners believe a student’s ability to control his/her environment is empowering and can improve quality of life. (Abery, Bruininks, and Eggebeen, Field and The importance of

postsecondary education has increased dramatically because of changes in the nation’s labor market Hoffman, 1992; Halpern, 1996; Van Reusen, Deschler and Schumaker, 1989; Wehmeyer, 1994; Wehmeyer and Kelchner). Education is one way that leads to empowerment and a higher quality of life. The importance of postsecondary education increased dramatically due to changes in the nation’s labor market. 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 professional life obtained through postsecondary education give people with disabilities access to a better quality of life?

Minimal research has been conducted in this area relevant to the professional lives of people with disabilities. Objective components for assessment should include: life satisfaction, employment-economic integration, employment stability, life satisfaction, employment-economic integration, employment stability, personal choice/control, residential integration, social networks, community assimilation and acceptance, social/recreational-
leisure integration, family integration, formal support services, citizenship/contribution, and educational involvement (Lin, 1996). Domains for subjective components will vary from person to person and may look very different for those with a disability. (Tam, 1998).

Some variables that may effect quality of life are: locus of control, communication skills accommodations, socioeconomics, type of disability and when disability occurred (birth or during life), social supports, community involvement, history of employment and range of settings/responsibilities. Quality of life is associated with substantial freedom and dignity, and is actualized to achieve maximum independence, self-acceptance, and social acceptance. This should be even truer 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 professional life obtained through postsecondary education give people with disabilities access to a better quality of life?

2. What does quality of life mean/what does it look like for a person with a disability?

3. Is this the same meaning/picture as a person without a disability?

4. Are people with disabilities acting what they value or do they inhabit worlds of other people’s construction?

**Study Method**

Minimal research has been completed that examines the outcomes of postsecondary education for people with disabilities. Thus, it is important to use the in depth approach given by qualitative methods. Qualitative methods offer significant advantages to the understanding of such poly-dimensional human experience as the one being studied. Case studies will be used to describe both people with disabilities and those without, on their respective thoughts on the quality of life.

First, permission for research on human subjects will be obtained from The Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The interview will take place in a comfortable room. An experienced interviewer will be chosen. The reliability of the study will be by using the same list of objective quality of life indicators and subjective probe questions.

Then informants will be identified. They will be people with disabilities and similarly employed people without disabilities who have successfully negotiated post secondary education and are employed. A professional society willing to nominate members interested participating in the study will be identified and approached. Five people with disabilities will be matched to a similarly employed five. Selected informants will reveal and describe both their objective quality of life indicators and subjective quality of life indicators. A person with disabilities working in a certain field will be compared to a person of the same profession and their quality of lives will be compared.
All interviews will be tape recorded (with the permission of the interviewee), transcribed and note taken on relevant information (verbal and non-verbal). The researcher will then study the transcripts and notes carefully, finding themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser, Strauss; 1967, Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Computer software for qualitative data analysis will be used to enhance the reliability of the analysis process. (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Richards & Richards, 1994). Results will be offered to the informants for feedback (testimonial validity) so that the participants will be able to validate or refute the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions (Kotre, 1984; Stiles, 1993; Lincoln & Guba; 1985.)

The data from the case studies will entered into a qualitative analysis computer program, called Ethnograph. A content analysis of the data will be completed using a constant comparative method yielding themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A second researcher will again analyze the data and comparisons of findings will be generated; this will increase trustworthiness or validity of the findings. The computer program, enhancing replicability, will record an audit trail of the findings, themes in this analysis. A report of the findings will be generated.

**Products**

It is anticipated that several products will result. A presentation at a national conference will distribute the findings to a select audience. A research brief and journal article will further the distribution. The findings will hopefully give an idea of where to begin in helping to bridge the transition from postsecondary education to employment.

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References


Wehmeyer, M. and Kelchner, K. (n.d.). A vision for the future:

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