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Career Success in the Perception of Early Childhood Education Studies Graduates

Abstract

In this article, we present the original study focused on the perception of professional success among graduates of the Preschool and Early Childhood Education at the Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Warsaw. The authors focused on a group of the graduates who, in the initial interview, declared that they felt professionally fulfilled – which was a key criterion for the selection of participants. Most of the respondents were active primary school teachers, but there were also some university teachers. The aim of the study was to analyse the perception of professional success among the Faculty graduates and to analyse the factors that support the process of achieving such success. The results clearly indicate that success is perceived by teachers not only through the perspective of professional achievement, but is also considered in the context of work-life balance – a full sense of fulfilment must encompass both spheres. In addition, those interviewed emphasise the significant role of support from family and loved ones as an important foundation for their professional journey. The article contributes a valuable voice to the discussion on subjective dimensions of career success among graduates of Preschool and Early Childhood Education studies.

Keywords: career success, graduates, career, teacher, job.

Interest in career success, its definitions and the factors that influence success is constantly increasing. The reasons for this could be found in the changing

role of employment in the competitive labour market. On the one hand, the problem of work-life balance is widely discussed in contemporary social science (Susanto, Hoque, Jannat, Emely, Zona, Islam 2022; Gounder, Govender 2018; Rahim, Ibrahim, Sabapathy, Loganathan, Jusoh, Ahmad, Elshaikh, Osman 2018; Haar, Russo, Suñe, Ollier-Malaterre 2014). On the other hand, a high standard of living, which is propagated in the media, is closely linked to the level of income and time-consuming professional commitment. Beliefs about career success play a key role in shaping both job and life satisfaction. When individuals have clear personal criteria for their career achievements, they are more likely to experience professional fulfillment and a stronger sense of overall well-being. This approach not only adds to their subjective assessment of career satisfaction, but also contributes to a broader appreciation of life satisfaction.

Professional success is defined as: “producing effective and tangible results through the skills and competencies in the area of one’s professional identity” (Aburumman, Barhem 2020). This definition emphasises the measurable impact and skills required for the task. A successful career is when the person is able to build a social network to collaborate, find and capitalize on opportunities, knows how to build self-confidence and strives to develop their skills (Judge, Van Vianen, De Pater, 2004).

There are studies on objective and subjective career success (Aburumman, Barhem 2020; Paleczek, Bergner, Rybnicek, 2018; Abele, Spurk 2009; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, Feldman 2005) and what distinguishes them are their determinants. The first type of factors is quite easy to extract (e.g. education and skills development, proactive personality, long-term employment, etc.). Objective career success is defined by verifiable achievements such as salary, promotions and professional status, which have long been considered markers of career success in many societies (Gu, Su, 2016; Heslin, 2005).

Research suggests that the idea of success combines objective measures of performance i.e. productivity and subjective measures like job satisfaction, self-evaluation of achievement and self-efficacy as a personal element of success (Nazar 2013, as cited in Skoryk, Grystyk, 2020). It is impossible to be successful without believing that one’s own abilities are sufficient to achieve personal goals (Bandura 1991; Pękala 2022). The basis of subjective belief in career success is “the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those imposed by parents, peers, an organisation, or society” (Mirvis, Hall, 1994, p. 366). This conviction can lead to an experience of satisfaction and fulfilment at work and further increase work motivation. Career fulfilment can occur when the person identifies strongly with a goal, and such a sense of meaning is an element that cannot be built from the outside (Oliveira Silva, Barreiros Porto, Arnold, 2019). These categories refer to personal values and the element that unites both subjective and objective professional success is the

goal, even if its origin and perception are different in both cases. Greater attention should be paid to different views and personal perceptions when discussing criteria for career success, rather than using simply standardised one-size-fits-all measures (Mayrhofer, Briscoe, Hall, Dickmann, Dries, Dysvik, 2016).

The decision to focus on this particular research group (graduates of Primary Education studies at the Faculty of Education of the University of Warsaw) stems from both the needs of the labour market and the social significance of this profession. In Poland, the teaching profession is steadily losing its appeal: increasingly fewer young people are choosing to study education, and the number of unfilled teaching positions is growing every year. At the start of the 2025/26 school year the Ministry of Education reported 12.7 thousand vacancies for teachers listed in regional superintendent databases, with the largest share of these offers concerning preschool teachers¹. At the same time, the teachers' union (ZNP) estimated the true number of missing teachers at around 20 thousand, as schools cover gaps with overtime and retirees². The capital city of Warsaw consistently registers advertisements for teaching positions, particularly in preschools and grades 1–3 of primary school.

From a societal perspective, the stakes are very high. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of teacher–child interactions in the early years is the single most important determinant of children's developmental and educational outcomes, with long-term benefits for both individuals and the economy (Bostic, Schock, Jeon, Buettner, 2003; Lang, Tebben, Luckey, Hurns, Fox, Ford, Ansari, Pasque, 2024; Melasalmi, Hurme, Ruokonen, 2022). Therefore, acknowledging and strengthening the professional success of early childhood teachers is not only a matter of individual well-being but also a question of public interest.

Graduates of the Early Childhood Education programme at the University of Warsaw are a particularly relevant group to study. The Faculty of Education is one of the largest academic centres preparing teachers for work with the youngest children in Poland, and its graduates are a significant source of new entrants into the Warsaw labour market, where demand is greatest. Investigating how these graduates define and pursue career success provides insights into how the profession can be made more attractive and sustainable at a time when recruitment and retention are critical challenges. It is therefore crucial for researchers and workplaces to understand what success criteria employees themselves consider important, as these personal reference points drive their productivity, eagerness to work and job satisfaction (Weston, Cardador, Hill, Schwaba, Lodi-Smith, Whitbourne, 2021; Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, Mansfield, 2012).

¹ <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Brakuje-ponad-20-tys-nauczycieli-Bez-nadgodzin-sie-nie-obejdzie-8991191.html>

² <https://samorzad.pap.pl/kategoria/edukacja/w-polsce-brakuje-okolo-20-tys-nauczycieli-jak-szkoly-radza-sobie-z-wakatami>

The study

For the purposes of this text, the authors designed and conducted an original empirical, qualitative research. The study was conducted in the first half of 2024. The authors set the goal of exploring the perception of professional success in the study group. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to study a homogeneous group and to assure the consistency of the studied perspectives (Ahmad, Wilkins, 2025). Graduates of Preschool and Early Childhood Education (pl: *Edukacja Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna*³) at the Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw, were invited to participate in the study.

The following main research questions were asked in this study:

1. How do the participants perceive professional success?
2. What are the elements that promote and hinder professional success?
3. Which experiences and elements of the knowledge and skills gained in the Early Childhood Education programme can contribute to the professional success of graduates?

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which were conducted through the Zoom platform (Elnahla, Neilson, 2022). Each interview was recorded with prior consent from the participant. Once a transcription of the interview was prepared, its recording was deleted.

Sample

The survey consists of 13 interviews with graduates of the major Preschool and Early School Education. Participants in the study were between 29 and 65 years of age. Each study participant was asked the question: "Do you feel that you have achieved professional success?" Only those graduates who answered this question affirmatively were invited to participate in the study. Due to the need to reach people who declared that they had achieved professional success, the selection of the sample was purposeful.

³ The name *Edukacja Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna* used in this article refers to the type of specialisation relating to the education received by all graduates. Since 1972/1973, when the first students began their education in this specialisation, the name of this specialisation has changed many times.

Data analysis

In the data analysis, the Thematic Analysis (TA) method was used to analyse the content of the interviews. The study used the above method to describe the theme of career success in education as perceived by the people interviewed in a detailed and divergent way. This allowed the researchers to identify what career success is in the perception of the respondents and to select the main themes emerging from the interviews.

Data from the interviews was analysed based on the following stages:

1. Detailed familiarisation with the data: close and repeated reading of the transcriptions of the interviews.
2. Coding: identification of labels indicating relevant elements that can be linked to the research findings.
3. Creation of initial threads: based on analysis of previous labels to identify potential themes.
4. Reviewing the threads: to further understand whether they support a convincing interpretation of the data, answering the research question.
5. Defining and naming the threads: developing and naming each thread.
6. Writing: to describe the results obtained and referring to the existing literature (Braun, Clarke, 2012; 2019).

Research

To understand what contributes to professional success among Preschool and Early Childhood Education graduates is fundamentally important for both current students and teachers in the field. While the existing literature often focuses on students' perspective and quality of the programmes, or teachers' insights on their everyday work, the personal perspectives of graduates who self-identify as having achieved professional success are not often explored (Lumsed, Musgrave, 2023; Egert, Dederer, Fukkink, 2020; Kouser, Akhter, 2020; Silberfeld, Mitchell, 2018; Moloney, 2010).

Through interviews, the respondents share their experiences, reflections and key factors that they believe contributed to their success. Highlighting their statements, in the following section of the article the authors present the results of their research in an attempt to capture the essence of achieving occupational success. The results aim to provide an insight into the milestones that provide a closer look at success from the perspective of those who have achieved it.

When can we talk about success – research perspective

When it comes to defining professional success, most respondents associated this concept with achieving goals. One of the interviewees described themselves as a person who sets and reviews these goals:

For me, it is not important that someone tells me that I have achieved professional success, but that I feel it.

It seems that people who achieve professional success have strong positive feelings towards it. Many of the interviewees reported satisfaction, joy and even a sense of pleasure in connection with their work. What triggers these feelings? The belief that they fulfil their obligations at the highest level, which in turn motivates them to work even harder:

I know that I am doing my job well. I am happy about it, I would like to get even better, [do] even more.

Another subjective element mentioned by the graduates is the sense of achievement, which is often associated with the concept of professional success, as both are related to self-esteem and independence. The latter component was also mentioned by our participants as an indispensable prerequisite for professional success. While the interviewees appreciated the support of people from their family environment or professionals, many of them pointed out that their own efforts, their courage to take risks and the introduction of new solutions are the most important success factors.

One of the interviewed teachers defined the conceptual category analysed as follows:

(Success is) the feeling that I am contributing something, giving myself to others, making a positive impact.

The desire to share one's time and skills with others seems to be a deep, inner motivation in educational work. What links this response to the second, quoted below, is an awareness of the intended and unintended effects of interacting with other people:

My first professional success was that of a friend who performed physical work in a kindergarten, started her education under the influence of talking to me and became an inspector after a few years.

Although the interviewee worked with children, she considers the promotion of her colleague, to which she contributed, as her greatest professional success.

External, objective indicators of success included appreciation from the students' parents and, regardless of the current job, subsequent career advancement. Another common element mentioned by respondents were changes their

pedagogical activities had led to. The nature of these changes might be various, as the following statements show:

Changes that I have been able to introduce in the educational field based on research findings.

When children don't cry [after successful adaptation], they want to come to kindergarten.

Participants' approach to the changes differs by profession, just as the way they define their own success. Researchers mention the defence of their dissertation, publications and participation in scientific projects. Early childhood education teachers associate their professional success to the progress of the children (e.g. passing exams) as well as to the sympathy and trust of the students:

The children come to me, even if they are no longer in my class. They hug me and tell me what's going on in their lives.

Keys to professional growth

When asked about the actions that interviewees have taken to succeed professionally, the development of their skills, especially through studies (in the field of broadly understood education) and courses were indicated the most frequently. Among the training courses, they mentioned the Veronica Sherborn Method course, Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Actions related to looking for and choosing a job were also pointed out. However, "the right" job is defined differently by the respondents. One of them said that he felt comfortable in the place where he could contribute his ideas, while the other teacher claimed:

I was looking for a kindergarten where the values that were important to me were present every day, not only in theory but also in practice.

Other activities mentioned by the respondents were related to gaining experience at work and even drawing conclusions from their own mistakes or failures. One of the participants said that she did not manage to get her dream job, two others spoke of difficulties working with children (problems with discipline, accidents with pupils). Failed lectures or lessons were also mentioned, which paradoxically contributed to improving the quality of work and were therefore steps on the road to professional success.

An interesting category in the context of professional success is the ability to combine different areas of life and work. The authors of the following article have categorised them into three groups, as respondents talked about:

- the ability to combine teaching and academic work at the university,
- the compatibility of organisational and pedagogical tasks at school,
- their life-work balance skills.

The graduates thus recognise how important it is for professional success to take care of yourself, manage your time, but also being aware of your own limitations. This has been emphasised a few times, i.e.:

I know that I am not the superwoman who can help everyone. I can exhaust myself in this way; I also have to look after my mental wellbeing [...] And that's also very important in my job, not to burn like this candle.

Awareness of the professional burnout and the fact that the interviewee is trying to protect themselves from is clearly apparent in the above statement.

Factors promoting career success

The most frequently mentioned internal factors that have influenced the professional success of the research participants were motivation, persistence and determination in pursuing a career and overcoming obstacles. These elements seem to be indispensable in achieving goals and getting to a place that would satisfy ambitious graduates of the Faculty.

Although participants claimed that they are the main people responsible for their own success, they also recognise the role and help of others. They listed the principals of schools and kindergartens where they work, the professors who have taught them or with whom they currently work.

The external would definitely be the principal, and I had a principal here when I came to school who was also such an authority for me.

Some refer to colleagues whose successes have motivated them to seek career advancement. Those mentioned above could have a direct impact on taking up and pursuing a specific path in a professional career. Others named family members – a spouse or/and children. Survey participants indicated that family members gave them the support and strength to work and achieve their goals.

Certainly also the support of the family, well I wouldn't be able to carry out all these activities if it wasn't for my husband, for example, staying with the children during my trips, so it's certainly a very important external factor that this is an opening.

It appears that success is firmly rooted in third-party support. Whether it is the beginning of a professional journey, or in the course of obtaining successive degrees of professional promotion, it is the support of other people that matters.

Factors hindering career success

It is quite interesting to notice that the element that facilitated professional success for some of the research participants, was the same thing that hindered

it for others. And that specific factor is family. Starting a family and having children entails shifting at least some of one's energy from professional duties to domestic responsibilities.

Definitely having children in terms of... absolutely I wouldn't change that, but it's if you're talking about career success, well it's definitely a hindrance of some kind.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that it was a challenge not to have many practical skills at the beginning of their work. Such skill deficits can certainly delay success, although on the other hand they are understandable and certainly accompany almost every person starting a career.

Some of those interviewed named covid-19 pandemic as a factor that disrupted their professional success. During lockdowns teachers were facing a whole new reality. They had to face the challenge of remote teaching, often left without support from the school or the governing body. They themselves, at an extremely fast pace, had to work out how to teach remotely. This was particularly difficult for teachers working with the youngest children, who often could not write or read (Marchlik, Wichrowska, Zubala, 2021).

One interviewee mentioned that the ongoing changes in legislation are a huge struggle. The regulations and educational programmes change with almost every new government. The teachers must make adjustments relating to the curriculum, change textbooks and find/ make new teaching aids. But the changes concern not only the teaching process. They also affect teachers' professional development (Dz.U. 2023, poz. 1672). In the latest amendment of 2023, some teachers lost previously gained professional degrees.

Study experiences crucial to success

Research participants considered key study experiences contributing to their success to be: student internships, particular classes, supportive academic staff and a broad education. It is noteworthy that all respondents mentioned a number of factors related to their university experience that helped / positively influenced them to achieve career success. This may indicate that people who are motivated to succeed are able to find applications and use a variety of experiences to achieve their goals. To illustrate these factors, here are some quotes from the interviews.

There were all these activities in the form of workshops like this, where we could present our ideas among ourselves, as well as activities where there were, where you were working with the project method or you were going out of the university and doing something outside the building.

For me, the key experiences were when I had classes with people who were practitioners, who brought up examples from their professional lives a lot.

A very good experience for me at the time was the small groups, because I was learning at a time when the group was 12 people.

I loved these studies and the people who ran them and the idea of running and implementing it.

I remember a class on emotional communication, it gave me the basis of some knowledge, which later translated into something that can also be used directly in my work with the other person.

Pathways to career success for pre-service teachers

Take advantage of what the university offers, [...] you get it on a plate.

The last question in the interview gave quite a range of answers. The study participants were asked to give advice to current students of the Faculty of Education that might contribute to success in their professional life. The answers that came through most often were: to take advantage of the classes, to inquire, to get involved in the classes, to keep training, to open up to the opportunities that the studies offer: trips, meetings with people invited to the Faculty. In the eyes of those interviewed, the Faculty provides students with ample opportunities for development and a wide range of experiences that prepare future employees to fulfill a variety of tasks. The classes themselves are only part of what the Faculty offers. The study participants believe that it is worthwhile to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the university.

Such that they open themselves up to the opportunities offered by their studies to the classes they take, because I know that these classes are not appreciated on a regular basis. They are appreciated later [...] so that they really take advantage of both the university and other opportunities [...] such as Erasmus trips. For example, people who come from abroad.

To focus on your development, to simply grow, to look for different training courses, courses that you can follow so in line with your needs, and some professional plans.

Summarising the suggestions of the study participants, they encouraged future students of the Faculty of Education to:

- utilise all the opportunities offered by the university,
- endeavour to find additional development opportunities (training, courses),
- be interested in people, ask questions,
- be prepared for different/unexpected situations,
- allow yourself to make mistakes,
- do not be discouraged by the documents (in the educational institutions),
- seek support and allies everywhere,
- develop self-esteem and self-control.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have decided to analyse the perception of professional success in the respective research group. Graduates of the Preschool and Early Childhood Education programme identify professional success with independently setting and realising their own goals. They associate the term with satisfaction, a sense of achievement and the results of their own endeavours. The results are consistent with other studies, which indicates that active career-related behaviours are strongly associated with success (De Vos, De Clippeleer, 2009). However, they also value the contribution of other people, such as their professors, head teachers, family members and colleagues. Bhavé et al. claim that with social information processing theory, people understand and shape their perceptions, needs and values through interactions with other people, and this social influence provides a perspective through which individuals evaluate their work and career (Bhavé, Kramer, Glomb, 2010).

Although success may be associated with high income or significant wealth (Smale, Bagdadli, Cotton, Russo, Dickmann, Dysvik, Gianecchini, Kaše, Lazarova, Reichel, Rozo, Verbruggen, 2019), these are not factors considered by our participants. Sharing their time and skills with others and contributing to their children's progress are synonyms for success in this particular perception. The gratitude of the parents of pupils and students is an important proof of their commitment to the work. When teachers generously invest their energy – not only in teaching, but also advising and tailoring to individual needs – they make a significant contribution to their students' development, which gives them a sense of fulfilment and contributes to their sense of success.

Graduates mentioned motivation, perseverance and determination as personal characteristics that are critical to success, which is consistent with the available research. External factors that had a favourable effect on professional development were a well-planned education and later career paths (Jo, Park, Song, 2023; Van den Borre Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck, 2021).

The data shows that there are some elements that hinder professional success. On the one hand, family members were mentioned as important sources of professional support, while on the other hand, domestic responsibilities are seen as an obstacle to professional fulfilment. These results have been confirmed by previous research. Family involvement can be a potential source of career problems related to choice or decision-making processes (Gati, Krausz, Osipow, 1996), on the other hand, family resources (emotional, financial, organisational support) can positively influence career success (Becker, Moen, 1999; Beckma, Stanko, 2020; Cooper, 2014; Petriglieri, Obodaru, 2019). However, domestic duties are a career barrier, especially for women (Mayrhofer, Meyer,

Schiffinger, Schmidt 2008), who were mainly our research group, which is why this topic was addressed so intensively in the present study.

Lack of practical skills, especially at the beginning of professional life, and frequent changes in legislation are the biggest difficulties, especially for beginning teachers. These challenges may slightly delay the development of effective teaching strategies that directly contribute to building confidence in the classroom, which has a direct impact on shaping the teacher's self-esteem and achieving professional success. Without adequate support in the workplace, beginning teachers may find it difficult to demonstrate their full potential, which can affect both their professional development and their long-term future in the profession (Admiraal, Kittelsen Røberg, Wiers-Jenssen, Saab, 2023; Garcia-Hernandez, Buysse, Thorp, 2022). Therefore, our interviewees encourage current students to take advantage of their courses and utilise the opportunities that arise from their studies, such as Erasmus trips, additional training, meaningful internships and meetings with foreign academics (Arviv Elyashiv, Rozenberg, 2024; Bolli, Caves, Oswald-Egg, 2021).

Like most research that focuses on a specific subject area and analyses a homogeneous research group, it needs to be expanded and specified. It would be useful to also study the students of early childhood education studies at other universities in order to compare the opinions of the recipients of the different programmes. More independent variables should be considered – in the future, we could analyse and compare graduates in various age groups and at different stages of their careers.

In conclusion, success is a goal pursued by individuals, which highlights its universal importance. However, achieving success is not simple as it is shaped by various factors such as personal effort, social support but also opportunity, time and even luck. These findings underline the complex nature and importance of the success that has been the subject of our study.

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Sukces zawodowy w percepcji absolwentów studiów z zakresu edukacji wczesnoszkolnej

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia autorskie badanie poświęcone percepcji sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów kierunku edukacja przedszkolna i wczesnoszkolna Wydziału Pedagogicznego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. Autorzy skoncentrowali się na grupie tych absolwentów, którzy we wstępnym wywiadzie zadeklarowali swoje przekonanie o osiągnięciu sukcesu zawodowego, co stanowiło kluczowe kryterium doboru uczestników. Większość badanych to aktywni nauczyciele szkoły podstawowej, ale także nauczyciele akademicy. Celem badania była analiza percepcji sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów Wydziału i analiza czynników wspierających proces osiągnięcia owego sukcesu. Wyniki jednoznacznie wskazują, że sukces postrzegany jest przez uczestników badania nie tylko przez pryzmat osiągnięć zawodowych, ale rozpatrywany jest również w kontekście balansu między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym – pełne poczucie spełnienia musi obejmować obie te sfery. Dodatkowo osoby badane podkreślają znamienne rolę wsparcia ze strony rodziny i najbliższych, którzy stanowią istotne wsparcie ich drogi zawodowej. Artykuł wnosi cenny głos do dyskusji nad subiektywnymi wymiarami sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów studiów z zakresu edukacji początkowej.

Słowa kluczowe: sukces zawodowy, absolwenci, kariera, nauczyciel, praca.