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SUCCESS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how graduate students in educational sciences define academic success and the factors influencing it. Using a phenomenological approach in methodology, thirteen master's and PhD students voluntarily participated. The analysis followed the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), moving from detailed initial noting to the development of emergent themes and cross-case interpretations. The data analysis revealed four themes in students' success definitions. These are academic development, personal or intrinsic values, professional development, and social or cultural values. Academia-oriented students emphasized publishing, academic identity, and specialization, while profession-oriented students highlighted practical application, personal growth, and social recognition. Factors shaping their success were grouped as personal, family, cultural, supervision, peer, field, profession, and faculty related. Supervisor support, peer collaboration, and academic flexibility served as key enablers. However, time constraints, institutional barriers, gender roles, and limited workplace incentives appeared as common challenges. Overall, the findings indicate that success in graduate education cannot be understood only as an outcome of individual effort. Rather, it emerges through the interplay between personal aspirations and the conditions. These results point to the importance of more flexible, supportive, and socially responsive graduate programs in education.

Keywords:

academic success; educational sciences; graduate students; phenomenology

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■ INTRODUCTION

Graduate education in educational sciences plays an important role in advancing both academic research and professional practice. These programs foster research competence, critical reflection, and scholarly identity, while also supporting the continuous professional development of teachers and practitioners (Başer et al., 2005; Gömleksiz & Yıldırım, 2013; İlter, 2020; Toprak & Taşgın, 2017). Graduate students in educational sciences often represent two complementary profiles. There are aspiring to academic careers and those seeking professional advancement in educational institutions (Koşar et al., 2020; Gül & Dikbaş, 2023). Similar patterns are observed internationally, where graduate education has been described as both a site of academic identity formation and a pathway for professional development in education (Golde, 2005; Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). This dual orientation underscores the significance of educational sciences departments, which function as spaces where future scholars and practicing professionals intersect.

The literature shows that students' decisions to pursue graduate education are shaped by diverse motivations. For example career aspirations, personal growth, institutional regulations, and strategies to navigate uncertainty after undergraduate study (Kahraman & Tok, 2016; Türköz et al. 2021; Tanrıkuş & Üstün, 2020). Challenges frequently identified include structural barriers, supervisory relationships, and adaptation to the demands of postgraduate study (Keskin, 2023; Sevim, 2024; Weatherton & Schussler, 2022; Xu & Hjalmarsen, 2022). However, the question of how graduate students themselves define and experience success in educational sciences remains underexplored. Existing research often emphasizes institutional or policy-based definitions (Lowe, 2023). While students' own voices about what success means in their educational and professional trajectories receive limited attention.

■ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Aim of Graduate Education in Educational Sciences

In undergraduate programs offered by Faculties of Education, the primary aim is to provide foundational professional training grounded in scientific knowledge relevant to the teaching profession. Graduate programs are designed to develop individuals

who are equipped to meet contemporary demands and address complex, evolving educational challenges through critical engagement and innovative problem-solving (Başer et al., 2005). Today's technological world continues to accelerate, but keeping up with the rapidly expanding body of knowledge has become increasingly difficult. This has raised concerns regarding the adequacy of undergraduate education in preparing individuals for the multifaceted demands of professional and academic life. Accordingly, graduate education has gained importance as a key mechanism for fostering individual development and facilitating access to advanced levels of inquiry (Gömlüksiz & Yıldırım, 2013). Moreover, graduate education supports the acquisition of in-depth disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously enhancing higher-order intellectual skills such as critical thinking, academic research, and analytical reasoning. It also contributes to the development of professional competence and encourages adherence to academic ethics and scholarly values (İlter, 2020). In teacher education, graduate studies are particularly significant in promoting continuous professional growth, sustaining motivation, and enabling teachers (Toprak & Taşgın, 2017).

Graduate programs contribute substantially to individuals' professional and scholarly trajectories, offering the intellectual tools necessary for success across diverse domains. Across diverse graduate programs, graduates of educational sciences attract particular public attention worldwide. They play a crucial role in educating future generations and in offering specialized guidance and support (Brachem & Braun, 2018). In teacher education, the master's level aims at specialization in a chosen field, whereas the PhD level is intended to produce a significant and original research contribution to the educational sciences (Tuning Academy, 2008).

Unlike many other disciplines, the aims of graduate programs in educational sciences are shaped not only by scientific and professional considerations but also by the social nature of education and the specific dynamics of the teaching profession, while the general purposes of graduate studies often include producing patents and generating scientific knowledge (Bozan, 2012). Also, programs in educational sciences place particular emphasis on supporting both professional and personal development processes (Gül & Dikbaş, 2023; Koşar et al., 2020). For instance, Gül and Dikbaş (2023) highlight that teachers perceive graduate education as an opportunity to enhance their professional competencies, strengthen their analytical abilities, and develop the capacity to approach educational issues from multiple perspectives. Accordingly, the aim of graduate programs in educational sciences not

only encompass the broader aims of graduate education but also extend beyond them by addressing the unique requirements of the profession and its societal mission.

Students Profiles and Success in Graduate Programs of Educational Sciences

Professional development is not solely shaped by participation in formal training programs. Although motivation theorists have generally focused on goal-oriented effectiveness, students' professional development cannot be fully understood without considering the psychological and sociological needs that shape their motivation, engagement, and persistence throughout graduate education (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), human motivation is understood through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2017). In the context of graduate education, competence refers to students' perceptions of their ability to successfully meet academic and professional demands, autonomy involves having the opportunity to make independent choices and direct one's own professional development, while relatedness denotes a sense of belonging within the academic community and the establishment of meaningful relationships with supervisors and peers. The satisfaction of these needs contributes to greater intrinsic motivation, more active engagement in academic activities, and more successful professional development among graduate students.

On the other hand, during the transition to adulthood, one of the domains in which young adults are actively engaged is the characterization and exploration of their professions (Arnett, 2000). In young adults' career development, self-actualization, as well as establishing connections between their professional identities, social identities, and society, plays a crucial role in making sense of their lives (Severy, 2018). Therefore, the profiles of students pursuing graduate education, how they define success, and their motivations for enrolling in graduate studies are important both in terms of professional development and for graduate education.

The profiles of students enrolling in graduate programs in educational sciences are shaped both by the nature of the discipline and by the overarching aims of graduate education. Consequently, their motivations for pursuing graduate studies are influenced by this structure. Research indicates that the majority of candidates apply to graduate programs primarily for career advancement and personal development (Kahraman & Tok, 2016). In another study, Koşar et al. (2020) found that graduate

students who continue their professional teaching careers pursue graduate education for reasons of individual benefit, including professional development, enhanced social status, and economic support. Therefore, the profiles of graduate students in educational sciences vary according to their underlying purposes.

The predominant motivation for pursuing graduate studies in educational sciences is the aspiration to build an academic career (Tanrıkulu & Üstün, 2020). Numerous studies have examined students' reasons for undertaking graduate education in this field (Keskin, 2024; Tanrıkulu & Üstün, 2020). Although findings vary according to students' personal characteristics, the most frequently cited reasons include self-development, academic career advancement, and professional growth. These diverse motivations largely overlap either the pursuit of an academic career or the need for professional development. Accordingly, graduate students who enter the same program with different objectives are expected to conceptualize the process and experience of graduate education differently.

For individuals who apply to graduate programs within Institutes of Educational Sciences while continuing their professional careers, motivations are more diverse. Koşar et al. (2020) highlight that teachers in graduate programs often seek education to strengthen their professional role, acquire new knowledge related to teaching, and achieve individual benefits such as professional growth, social recognition, and financial opportunities. Similarly, Gül and Dikbaş (2023) emphasize that teachers perceive graduate education as contributing to their personal development, enhancing professional competence, fostering analytical skills, and cultivating the ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives.

Graduate students' motivations for pursuing education also influence the meanings they attach to graduate study. Bain et al. (2011) argue that motivation constitutes the foundation of success in graduate education, while Willingham (1974) suggests that the quality of how success is defined influences students' engagement with graduate study. Research also demonstrates that definitions of success extend beyond academic outputs to include personal development, persistence, and social recognition (Bell et al., 2014; Golde, 2005). For example, Weatherton and Schussler (2022) show that graduate students' understandings of success are multidimensional and dynamic. Similarly, Alfaifi et al. (2020), in their study of Saudi students in U.S. graduate programs, found that success is often defined in terms of completion, perseverance, and fulfilling program requirements, with advisor support and peer collaboration acting as critical enablers. In the UK context, Lowe (2023) highlights

institutional definitions of success dominating policy discourse, while students' perspectives are less frequently acknowledged. In short, these studies reveal that success is not a universal construct but one shaped by cultural, institutional, and individual contexts.

Fedynich et al. (2016) underscore that faculties often attribute graduate student success primarily to students' own academic and personal qualities. From another perspective, mentoring, financial support, and peer collaboration are identified as key factors influencing graduate student achievement (Collier, 2024). Moreover, scholars stress the need to examine students' perspectives on success (Weatherton & Schussler, 2022). Thus, in the educational sciences, diverse student profiles and differing individual variables contribute to distinct conceptualizations of success. Considering the socially embedded nature of educational sciences and the heterogeneous structure of graduate programs, it becomes evident that student profiles play a significant role in shaping how success is understood. Bell et al. (2014) argue that conceptualizations of graduate success must extend beyond the narrow metric of publication counts, pointing to the need for broader and more inclusive frameworks.

The present study aims to explore how graduate students in educational sciences experience and interpret the meaning of success through their lived experiences. Also, it explores how these interpretations are shaped by contextual factors that facilitate or hinder their success. By focusing on students' perspectives across diverse profiles, this research not only deepens the understanding of graduate education in educational sciences but also contributes to international debates on the multidimensional meanings of success in graduate education.

Based on this focus, research questions are:

- 1) How do graduate students in Educational Sciences define and interpret success in graduate education?
 - a. How do academia-oriented graduate students define success?
 - b. How do profession-oriented graduate students define success?
- 2) How do graduate students experience and interpret the factors that facilitate or hinder their success in graduate education?

■ METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design to explore graduate students' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to success in graduate education (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). IPA was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals make. In this framework, the study aimed to understand how graduate students in educational sciences interpret success, how they construct its meaning, and how their experiences and contexts shape these interpretations.

Participants. The participants were 13 graduate students enrolled in thesis-based master's and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs in educational sciences at state universities in Turkey during the 2025–2026 academic year. Purposeful criterion sampling was used to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Patton, 2002). The inclusion criteria were active enrollment in a thesis-based program in educational sciences, graduation from a teacher education program, at least one semester of graduate study, and voluntary participation. Attention was given to demographic diversity in terms of gender, program type, and employment status to capture how meanings of success vary across contexts. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Demographic Information About Participants

Participants	Gender	Graduate Education Process	Professional Experience	Graduate Program	Aim of Graduate Education
P1	Male	Masters /Thesis	Unemployed	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Academia-oriented
P2	Male	Masters /Thesis	Unemployed	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Academia-oriented
P3	Female	Masters /Thesis	Part-Time Employee	English Language Teaching	Academia-oriented
P4	Female	Masters /Thesis	Unemployed	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Academia-oriented
P5	Female	PhD /Thesis	14 Years	Physics Education	Profession-Oriented
P6	Female	PhD /Course	5 years	Special Education Teaching	Profession-Oriented
P7	Male	PhD /Thesis	14 years	Science Education	Profession-Oriented
P8	Female	PhD /Thesis	3 years	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Academia-oriented
P9	Male	Masters /Thesis	10 years	Curriculum and Instruction	Academia-oriented
P10	Male	Masters/Thesis	Part-Time Employee	Musics Education	Academia-Oriented
P11	Female	PhD /Course	5 years	Special Education Teaching-	Profession-Oriented
P12	Female	PhD /Course	2 years	Science Education	Academia-oriented
P13	Female	PhD /Thesis	10 years	Science Education	Profession-Oriented

Data Collection. The data for this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. The interview protocol was developed by the researchers based on an extensive review of the literature, analysis of similar previous studies, and expert opinion. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, with each session lasting approximately 40 to 50 minutes. Through the data collection process, strict adherence to ethical principles was maintained. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to all participants, and the principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized. Written informed consent forms were obtained prior to participation.

Data Analysis. The analysis was guided by the principles of IPA, which aims to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Consistent with its idiographic and interpretative nature, each transcript was analyzed in depth before identifying patterns across cases. Coding followed an inductive approach consistent with IPA, with rigor ensured through iterative reading and reflexive analysis conducted by the researchers (Smith et al., 2009). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and repeatedly read to ensure immersion in the data. Initial noting was conducted, focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects, which informed the development of emergent themes. Connections between these themes led to the formation of superordinate themes for each case.

Subsequently, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. The analysis was supported by Atlas.ti program; however, emphasis remained on interpretative engagement rather than mechanical coding. The importance of themes was based on depth and meaning rather than frequency. Frequencies were not used to determine the importance of themes; instead, significance was attributed based on the depth, richness, and interpretative relevance of participants' accounts. To enhance transparency, Table 2 presents an illustrative example of the analytical process, which demonstrates how initial codes were developed into sub-themes and themes. This example is provided to clarify the interpretative process rather than to represent all findings.

TABLE 2. An illustrative example of the analytical process from initial codes to theme

Quotations	Codes	Subthemes	Themes
“If I were an academic, I would consider myself successful. There is no point in publishing unless you secure a faculty position.”	academic career aspiration	Being academic staff	<i>Definitions Based on Academic Development,</i>
“I feel like I will never fully reach that point. I see success in small achievements; if I can complete something, I consider it a success.”	unreachable success; ongoing striving;	Unattainable success	<i>Definitions Based on Personal/Intrinsic Values,</i>
“I tend to be more practice-oriented; I see success as applying something in practice and testing whether it works.” “I see success as being able to apply what I write in my academic publications. I see that as success.”	classroom application; translating theory into action	Focusing on practical implementation	<i>Definitions Based on Professional Development,</i>
“You have a stronger voice in social settings because of your knowledge and extensive reading. I think this is a form of success”	being respected by others	Gaining social status	<i>Definitions Based on Social/Cultural Values</i>

Validity and Reliability. Validity and trustworthiness were ensured in line with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and close engagement with the data. The analysis was conducted by two researchers who independently coded the transcripts and then compared and discussed their interpretations. Differences were resolved through discussion until a shared understanding was reached. These differences mainly stemmed from varying interpretations of participants’ meanings and emphases and were resolved through reflexive discussion and re-examination of the data. Transferability was enhanced through detailed descriptions of the context and participants. Dependability was

ensured through a systematic analytical process, and confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts through direct quotations.

Role of Researchers. The researchers of this study recently completed their PhD education in Educational Sciences and currently work as academics at a university in Turkey. This positioning provided an insider perspective, enabling a deeper understanding of how graduate students experience and define success. At the same time, the researchers maintained reflexive awareness of their own positions and potential biases throughout the research process. This reflexive stance supported a careful and balanced interpretation of the data.

■ FINDINGS

This research was conducted with 13 graduate students (master's and PhD levels) in educational sciences. Based on their aim of graduate education, five participants were categorized as *profession-oriented*, aiming to improve their professional practice as a teacher, while eight were categorized as *academia-oriented*, aspiring to become future academic staff in universities. The analysis focused on participants' *definitions of success in graduate education and the reasons to affect academic success and the direction of the effects (positive or negative)*. The emerging themes and sub-themes are presented with quotations.

Definitions of Success

Participant graduate students' definitions of success in graduate education revealed the following themes: 1) *Definitions Based on Academic Development*, 2) *Definitions Based on Personal/Intrinsic Values*, 3) *Definitions Based on Professional Development*, and 4) *Definitions Based on Social/Cultural Values*. The themes and related sub-themes that emerged in Figure 1.

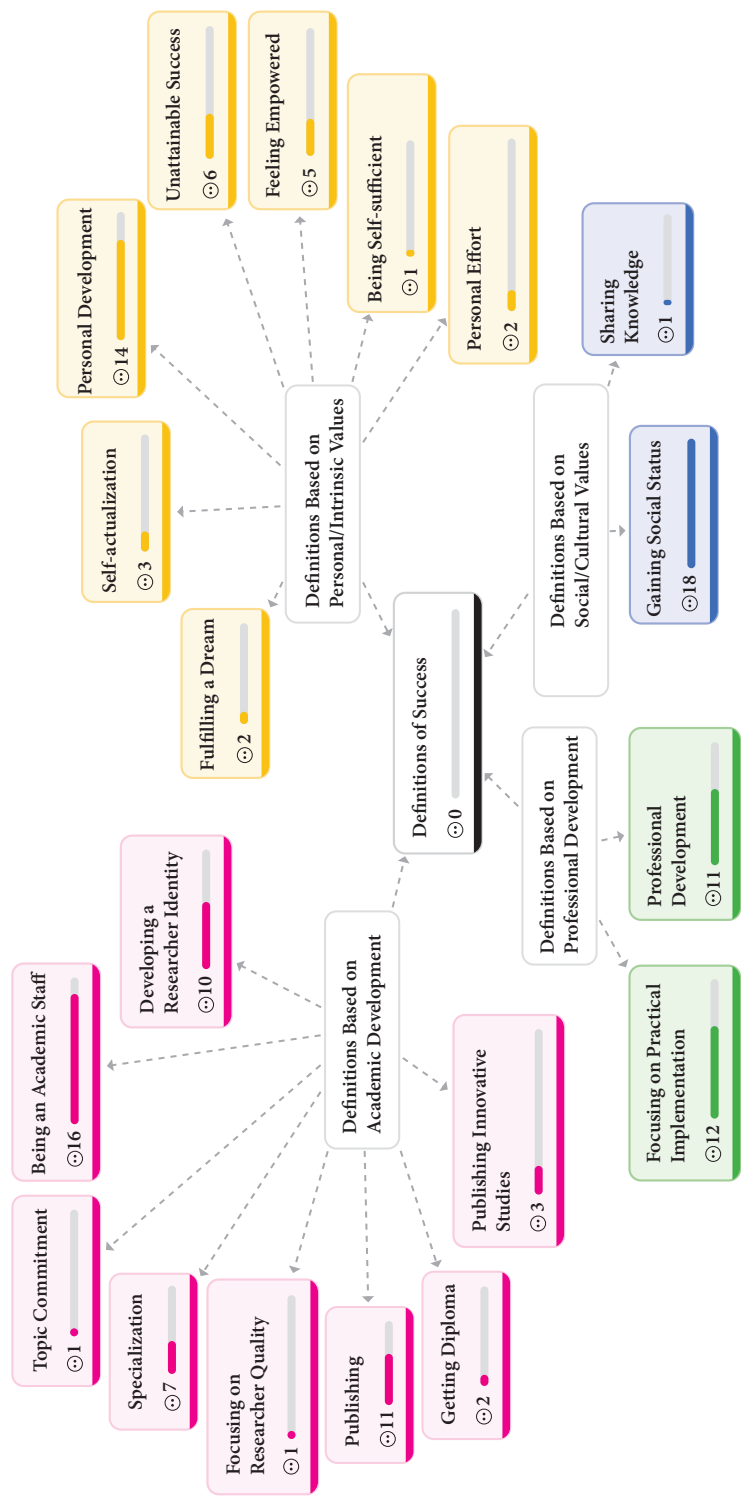


FIGURE 1. Themes and subthemes scheme for definitions for success

Academic Development. Academic success was experienced across participants as a process of becoming academically competent; however, the meanings attributed to this process varied depending on students' orientations. For profession-oriented students, academic development was also an important dimension of success, despite not being directly tied to an academic career goal. Producing academic work, such as projects or articles, was described as a way of demonstrating intellectual effort and engagement. As P3 expressed, *I think academic success is closely related to whether you produce something...*, suggesting that productivity functioned as a meaningful indicator of progress. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of understanding and intellectual realization. For instance, P7 described success as *understanding a philosophy and experiencing the joy of realizing 'how did I miss this?'* highlighting that success was also experienced as a process of gaining deeper insight. For profession-oriented students, developing a researcher identity also emerged as part of how success was experienced in graduate education. However, this identity was not linked to becoming an academic, but rather to engaging in academic production. In this sense, success was understood as the ability to produce scholarly work, indicating that research was valued as a form of intellectual engagement rather than as a career trajectory. P5 described this orientation more explicitly:

I would consider myself successful if I could contribute to the field in the areas we specialize in. If I can bring innovations to this field, I would consider myself successful.

These expressions suggest that success was also experienced as developing expertise and generating meaningful contributions within a chosen area. For academia-oriented students, success was primarily defined in relation to academic career trajectories. Being an academic staff, producing publications, and contributing to the field were central to how they made sense of success. As one P4 stated,

My definition of success is being able to become an academic staff member. Success, for me, means having a good career at the university. If I were an academic, I would consider myself successful.

Similarly, *...publishing and receiving citations means success* (P12) was interpreted as indicators of academic recognition and achievement. In this sense, success was experienced as aligning with the expectations and practices of academic life. A similar pattern was observed in relation to researcher quality, where participants associated success with producing high-quality academic work. For academia-oriented students, this emphasis was closely linked to their aspiration to

become academics, reflecting a desire to be recognized as competent and credible researchers.

Academia-oriented students also experienced success through their commitment to a specific research topic. For these participants, defining and sustaining a focus on a particular topic was not only a practical decision but also part of positioning themselves within an academic identity. As P3 stated, *I came here for just one topic... Since I came for this topic, I will work on it*, suggesting that success was closely tied to developing a sense of direction and continuity in their research. In this sense, engaging with a specific topic functioned as an expression of becoming an academic, where commitment to a research focus was experienced as an integral part of success.

Personal/Intrinsic Values. Success in graduate education was experienced by participants as deeply connected to personal and intrinsic meanings, reflecting both affective and identity-related dimensions of their experiences. Across both groups, success was not perceived solely as an academic outcome, but as an ongoing process of personal transformation. For profession-oriented participants, success was often experienced as a continuous and sometimes unattainable journey. Participants described it as a process without a clear endpoint, where progress was marked by ongoing effort rather than final achievement. As one participant expressed, *I compare success to a staircase. But it's not one where I can see the end. There's a sky above it. And honestly, I don't even know what's at the very top.* (P11). At the same time, participants emphasized personal change, indicating that graduate education reshaped their perspectives, goals, and ways of thinking (P5). In this sense, success in graduate education was closely tied to personal development, while also reflecting an awareness of its ongoing and incomplete nature. As P5 participant stated,

I started postgraduate education to improve my vision. Your purpose in life changes. Everything changes from the language you use in life, to your goals, to your motivation to accomplish something. I think that is a success.

This account suggests that success was experienced not only as academic progress, but also as a broader process of personal transformation. In addition, profession-oriented participants associated success with feeling empowered and fulfilling a dream and unattainable things. Success was experienced as both reaching toward a meaningful goal and recognizing the distance that remained. This reflects how graduate education was interpreted not only as professional advancement but also as a personally significant and emotionally meaningful journey. For academia-

oriented participants, personal and intrinsic values were also central; however, these experiences were more closely connected to self-realization within an academic context. Participants described feeling stronger and more capable through their engagement with graduate education, suggesting that success was experienced as an internal process of becoming. As one participant noted, *As I pursue graduate education, The stronger I feel, the more successful I become* (P4), indicating that success was closely linked to an increasing sense of competence and self-efficacy. At the same time, participants emphasized personal development in relation to cognitive growth, *It enables better decision-making and promotes multidimensional thinking* (P13). Similar to profession-oriented participants, academia-oriented students also described success as unattainable, reflecting the emotional complexity of striving for academic excellence. However, this experience was often accompanied by a strong sense of personal effort and self-sufficiency, where success was associated with becoming a self-directed and self-realizing individual.

Professional Development. Success in graduate education was also experienced in relation to professional development, particularly through the application of knowledge in real-life contexts. Across both groups, success was experienced as bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. For profession-oriented participants, success was closely linked to the direct application of theoretical knowledge into practice. Participants described how implementing newly learned approaches in their professional environments contributed to their sense of competence and productivity. As one participant expressed, *feeling like an effective and competent teacher, applying the right methods, and doing so with new knowledge makes me feel productive* (P5), while another noted that learning a new teaching approach was meaningful when it could be put into practice; *When I learn a new teaching approach, I try it out. I'm able to put it into practice* (P13). In this sense, success was experienced as observing change in one's professional practice, where translating theory into action played a central role.

For academia-oriented participants, professional development was also recognized as an important dimension of success. Participants emphasized that academic knowledge should extend beyond theory and contribute to practice, whether through teaching, problem-solving, or improving learning environments. As one participant stated, *It contributes to my teaching as well* (P1), while another highlighted the importance of making improvements and contributing to educational settings (P8). Also, P10 expressed

I see it as being one step ahead of my peers. I see it as standing out both in terms of professional development. I am also improving professionally. It contributes to my teaching as well. When I learn a new approach, I try it out and I can put it into practice.

Social/Cultural Values. Success in graduate education was also experienced in relation to social and cultural meanings, reflecting how participants positioned themselves within their social environments and cultural backgrounds. Success was experienced as socially meaningful across both groups. For profession-oriented participants, success was closely associated with social status, particularly in how they were perceived by others. Participants emphasized that holding a graduate degree changed how they were recognized within their family, social acquaintances and professional circles. As one participant noted, *there's a difference between saying 'I'm a bachelor's graduate' and saying 'I have a master's degree' (P13)*, suggesting that success was experienced as an elevation in social standing and recognition.

For academia-oriented participants, social and cultural meanings of success also included gaining social status and sharing knowledge. Participants described success not only in terms of status but also as the ability to share and present what they had learned. As reflected in the statement *being able to share my knowledge with others (P3)*, success was experienced as having a voice within a broader intellectual and social context. Similarly, graduate achievement was associated with gaining status. P4 expressed

For me, success in postgraduate education represents status in society. It means being able to speak with the power that knowledge gives you in any setting and having people listen to you. Even within a small group, it makes me feel like someone whose mind and judgment can be trusted.

Factors Shaping Graduate Students' Success

The analysis revealed that graduate students' success was shaped through a range of lived experiences situated within different personal, social, and institutional contexts. Rather than being determined by isolated factors, success emerged through the dynamic interplay of responsibilities, relationships, and structural conditions encountered during graduate education. Participants described how these experiences could both support and constrain their engagement with academic work, reflecting the complex and context-dependent nature of success. Accordingly, Figure 2 represents themes and subthemes for factors shaping graduate students' success.

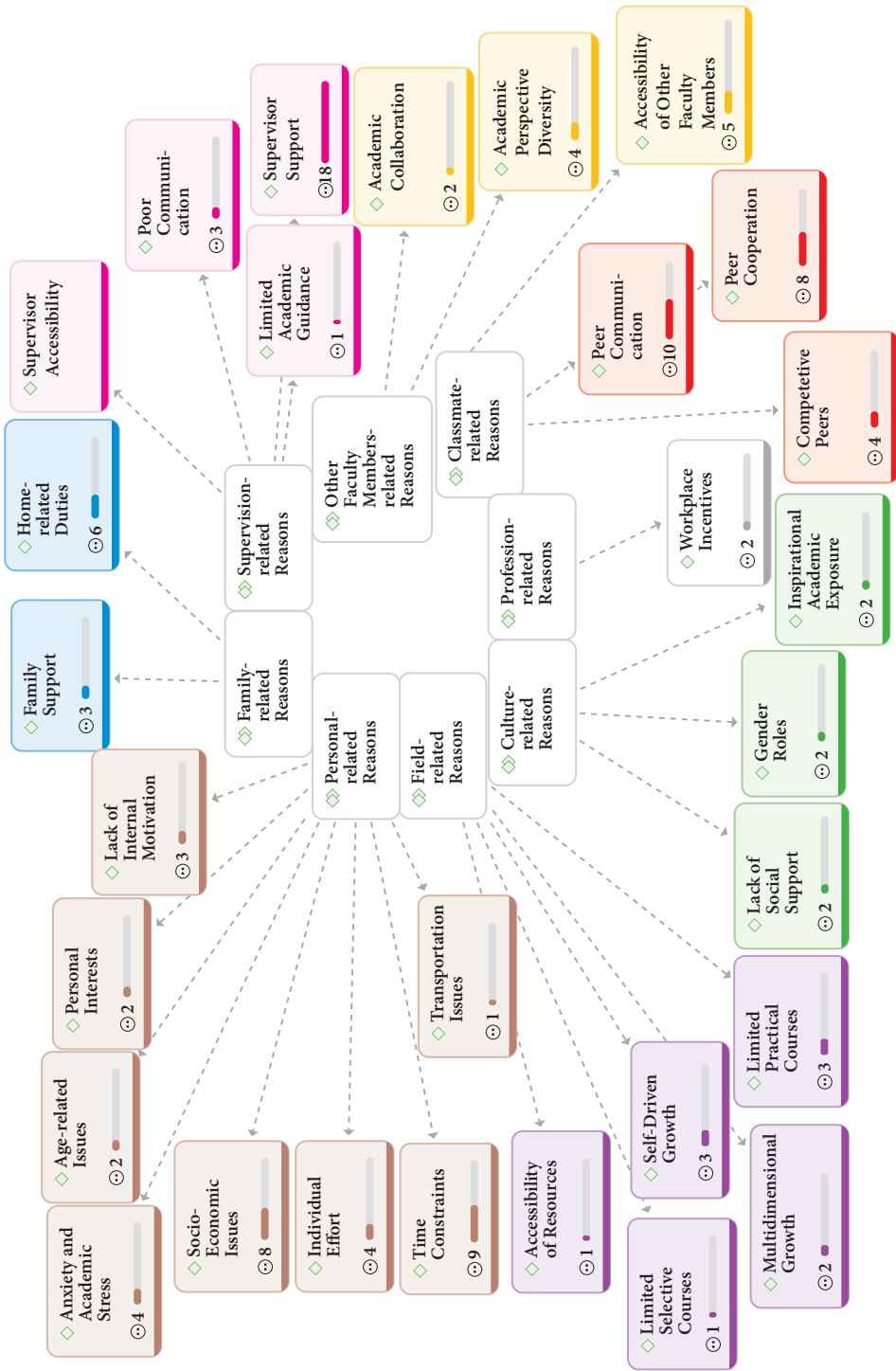


FIGURE 2. Themes and subthemes scheme for factors shaping graduate students' success

Personal-related Factors. Graduate students often experienced their academic success as shaped by personal circumstances, particularly time constraints. Participants described the difficulty of balancing academic responsibilities with other life roles, which created pressure on their ability to focus and sustain engagement. This was reflected in accounts of limited time for academic work, as one participant stated, *Working in a different job... prevents me from allocating time* (P3).

Similarly, socio-economic challenges intensified this experience for those managing financial and family responsibilities. In this context, anxiety and academic stress were not merely external conditions but were experienced as ongoing emotional states shaping how participants engaged with their studies. As another participant expressed, *Graduate education is a class-related matter* (P4), reflecting how academic responsibilities were perceived as embedded within broader life demands.

Family-related Factors. Family-related experiences also shaped how participants made sense of academic success. Home-related responsibilities were often experienced as burdensome and, at times, as invisible labor that competed with the time and energy required for graduate work. At the same time, family support—particularly emotional encouragement—was experienced as a significant source of motivation. As one participant noted, *You have a family you are responsible for... these responsibilities can sometimes have positive effects, but also negative ones* (P6), highlighting the dual nature of these responsibilities. Similarly, another participant emphasized the importance of support, stating that *it's important for one's partner or spouse to be supportive* (P12). These accounts suggest that academic success was experienced within an ongoing negotiation between responsibility and support in participants' family lives.

Supervision-related Factors. The student-supervisor relationship emerged as one of the most influential experiences shaping academic success. Supervisor support and accessibility were experienced as key enablers, providing both academic direction and emotional reassurance. Participants described how being able to reach their supervisors and receive guidance helped them navigate uncertainty and sustain progress. As one participant noted, *My supervisor guides me when I'm stuck or unsure about what to do and how to do it* (P11), while another emphasized that *it's important to be able to reach your thesis supervisor easily* (P2).

However, this experience was not uniform. Poor communication and limited academic guidance were experienced as significant barriers to success, with their impact varying depending on the supervisor's availability and responsiveness. For

some participants, restricted communication created discomfort, as reflected in the statement, *my supervisor had very strict boundaries... I never felt comfortable* (P1). Others experienced a lack of guidance as particularly challenging, especially when they already felt inadequate in their research process, as one participant expressed, *I don't think it's right for my supervisor to leave me alone... I'm already coming into it with a deficiency* (P10). These accounts suggest that supervision was experienced not merely as a structural component of graduate education, but as a relational and emotional process that directly shaped how students engaged with and interpreted their academic success.

Other Faculty Members-related Factors. Graduate students also reflected on how their interactions with other academic staff shaped their experiences of success. Accessibility of faculty members and exposure to diverse academic perspectives were experienced as enriching and intellectually stimulating. These interactions allowed participants to expand their thinking and engage more deeply with their studies. As one participant noted, *Constructive feedback from other faculty members... made a valuable contribution to my learning* (P4), highlighting the role of feedback in supporting academic development. Similarly, another participant emphasized the importance of broader academic engagement, stating that *diverse perspectives are essential... the process should allow collaboration beyond the thesis advisor* (P2). These accounts suggest that success was experienced not only through the supervisor–student relationship but also through participation in a wider academic network.

Peer-Related Factors. Peer relationships were experienced as both supportive and challenging in shaping academic success. Interaction with peers played a central role in sustaining motivation and fostering a sense of belonging. Participants who engaged in collaborative relationships described feeling emotionally supported, particularly when sharing similar struggles. As one participant noted, *Collaborating with classmates and sharing similar struggles has been a strong source of motivation for me* (P5). However, this experience was not uniformly positive. Competitive peer dynamics were also described as contributing to anxiety and self-doubt, especially when success was interpreted through comparison with others. As reflected in one participant's account, *Their overly competitive attitude had a negative impact on my performance...* (P4), such interactions could disrupt both emotional well-being and academic engagement. These accounts suggest that peer relationships were experienced as a complex and dual process, simultaneously functioning as sources of support and pressure in participants' academic journeys.

Field Related Factors. Field-related conditions were also experienced as shaping academic success. Participants described structural limitations, such as transportation difficulties and limited elective courses, as barriers that constrained their ability to engage fully in academic life. For instance, one participant noted that *there were no specialization courses tailored to everyone's field... I would have been more successful if the courses had aligned with each person's area of interest* (P9), highlighting the mismatch between program structure and individual needs. At the same time, some participants interpreted success in relation to multidimensional growth, emphasizing development across different areas rather than a single outcome. As one participant expressed, *I see success as a cluster of grapes—it's fulfilling to experience growth in various dimensions simultaneously* (P5), suggesting that success was experienced as a holistic and evolving process. These accounts indicate that academic success was shaped both by structural constraints and by how participants made sense of their learning environments.

Culture Related Factors. Cultural experiences were also described as shaping how participants made sense of academic success. Gender roles and lack of social support were experienced as pressures that required students, particularly women, to justify their participation in graduate education. These were not abstract social issues but were encountered as everyday experiences that influenced how participants engaged with their academic journeys. As one participant noted, *there are discouraging factors like 'she'll have a child soon and leave'...* (P11), reflecting how societal expectations could limit or challenge their academic trajectories. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of being able to communicate and explain their knowledge to others. For some, difficulty in articulating what they had learned was experienced as a barrier to success. As one participant expressed, *I struggle to explain the nature of science to anyone* (P7), suggesting that success was also connected to being understood and recognized within a broader social context. These accounts indicate that academic success was shaped not only by individual effort but also by the cultural meanings and expectations surrounding graduate education.

Profession Related Factors. Workplace conditions were also experienced as shaping academic success, particularly in relation to institutional support. Participants described how factors such as flexible working arrangements and recognition from their employers influenced their ability to engage with graduate studies. For working students, success was closely tied not only to academic progress but also to how well their professional environments accommodated their academic responsibilities. At the same time, a lack of support was experienced as a barrier. As one participant noted, *The process of obtaining permission from the school I work for can have a negative impact* (P4), highlighting how institutional constraints could limit engagement with academic work. These accounts suggest that professional environments functioned as either enabling or constraining contexts in shaping students' experiences of success.

Factors Shaping Academic Success Positively or Negatively

The final analysis revealed a set of categories that graduate students perceived as influencing their academic success either positively, negatively, or in some cases, both. The analysis focuses on the direction of influence of these factors. Figure 3 visualizes these categories based on graduate students' lived experiences, emphasizing how academic success is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, social, and institutional factors.

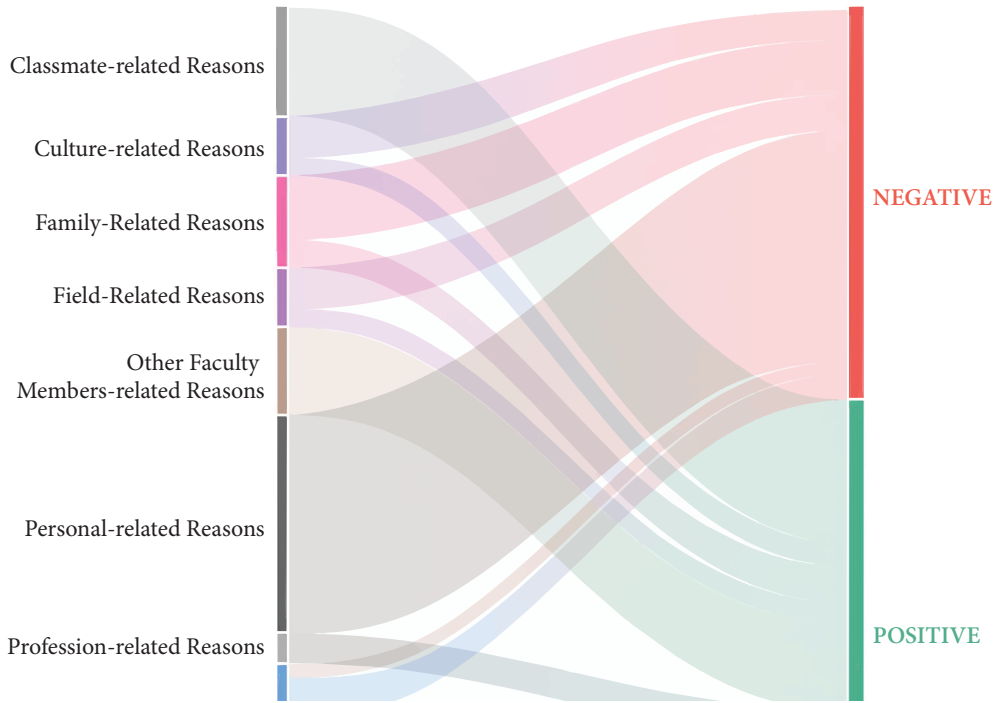


FIGURE 3. Reasons affecting academic success positively or negatively

According to figure 3, the analysis revealed that certain reasons predominantly influenced graduate students' academic success either positively or negatively, while others held a dual role. For example, supervisor-related and profession-related factors were most commonly associated with positive experiences, as students often emphasized the supportive role of their supervisors and the motivating effect of workplace incentives. In contrast, field-related and culture-related categories were generally linked to negative experiences due to limited academic resources, structural barriers, and societal pressures. Meanwhile, personal-related, family-related, classmate-related, and other faculty members-related factors emerged as both; these categories were described as both facilitators and barriers depending on the graduate students' circumstances.

DISCUSSION

The present study seeks to explore how graduate students in Educational Sciences construct, experience, and interpret the meaning of success through their lived experiences, and how these interpretations are shaped by contextual factors that facilitate or hinder their success. The findings indicate that success is defined across four interrelated domains: academic development, personal/intrinsic values, professional development, and social/cultural values. While both profession-oriented and academia-oriented students referred to these domains, their emphases varied.

Within the academic development dimension, becoming an academic staff member emerged as a central aspect of success for academia-oriented students. This aligns with Golde (2005) and Weatherton and Schussler (2022), who emphasize the role of academic career goals in shaping definitions of persistence and success. However, some participants entered graduate programs without clear career plans and later reconsidered academic ambitions due to Turkey's highly competitive job market. For these students, graduate education became a means of achieving social status, reflecting a shift from career-driven to prestige-oriented motivations. This shift can be understood in relation to emerging adulthood, where individuals actively explore different life directions and revise their goals over time (Arnett, 2000).

Participants P3 and P4 exemplify this shift. Initially pursuing graduate studies to explore their identities and delay life decisions, they later reconsidered academic careers due to limited opportunities. Nonetheless, they remained committed to their studies. This persistence reflects a redefinition of success in which completing graduate education itself becomes meaningful, even without securing an academic position, aligning with the social/cultural values dimension. This pattern can be understood in relation to emerging adulthood, characterized by uncertainty and shifting career decisions (Severy, 2018). Within this context, graduate education appears to function not only as an academic pathway but also as a space for identity exploration and repositioning.

Another key issue under academic development is developing a research identity, which was evident in the responses of both profession-oriented and academia-oriented students. Participants frequently referred to their current or ideal selves in relation to research-oriented roles, shaped by the program's structure, academic expectations, and interactions with faculty members. Although these identity positions were not always explicitly articulated, the underlying values and

orientations align with Xu and Hjalmarson (2022), who emphasize identity formation as a central aspect of PhD development. In this sense, developing a research identity reflects an increasing engagement with academic practices and a growing sense of scholarly self.

Specialization, another academic development sub-theme, was mentioned across both student groups. It reflects the pursuit of disciplinary expertise contributing to both academic and professional growth. According to Bell et al. (2014), demonstrating scholarly expertise is central to academic success, although such opportunities may be more accessible in fields like health or natural sciences. In educational sciences, where career paths may be more limited, specialization still emerged as meaningful. For students in applied subfields such as guidance and psychological counseling, special education, or music education, it was closely linked to professional competence and perceived success. For profession-oriented students, particularly those working as teachers, specialization was associated with improving classroom practice.

Within the personal/intrinsic values dimension, personal development emerged as a central aspect of how participants made sense of success, reflecting an internalized and individualized understanding. Rather than viewing graduate education solely through an institutional or credential-based lens, participants emphasized growth in self-awareness, intellectual maturity, and confidence. For example, participant P2 suggested that while there are multiple paths to development, graduate education offers a more structured one. This perspective highlights the role of graduate education in shaping personal identity beyond academic achievement, consistent with studies emphasizing personal development as a central motivation for engaging in graduate education and as a process that supports both individual growth and professional formation (Aktan, 2020; Maviş-Sevim & Akın, 2021).

Participants often described success in graduate education as an unattainable success, emphasizing that it is not something that can be fully reached or clearly defined. Rather than referring to large-scale achievements, many framed their progress through smaller, attainable milestones, such as publishing an article. This perception may reflect challenges related to perceived competence, which is considered a critical factor in academic motivation (Wigfield et al., 2015). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, where competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential (Ryan & Deci, 2017), defining success as unattainable success may indicate tensions between expectations and perceived capability in demanding

academic environments. At the same time, this experience was often accompanied by moments of feeling empowered, suggesting that participants navigated between uncertainty and a developing sense of self-efficacy. In this sense, the findings suggest that success is not understood solely in terms of external outcomes, but also as a subjective experience grounded in the extent to which students feel effective, self-determined, and socially connected in their academic environment. In particular, the internalization of externally regulated behaviors is more likely to occur when individuals feel connected to significant others (relatedness) and perceive themselves as capable of successfully performing the required tasks (competence). Nevertheless, the ambiguity and tension surrounding this process may also be attributed to certain structural constraints embedded within these conditions.

In the social/cultural values domain, gaining social status emerged as a salient theme across both student orientations. Success was often associated with upward mobility and enhanced social recognition. This aligns with Diogo et al. (2022), who found that PhD students link academic achievement with social recognition, and with Bourdieu's (1984) view of academic credentials as forms of symbolic capital. Similarly, Posselt and Grodsky (2017) suggest that graduate education can reproduce social inequality. In this sense, the findings indicate that traditional notions of prestige continue to shape how students conceptualize success.

Under professional development, the sub-themes of professional growth and focusing on practical implementation emerged. Students across both orientations emphasized applying theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. For profession-oriented students, this was reflected in improvements in classroom practice, while for academia-oriented students it extended to research and pedagogical applications. These findings align with Keskin (2023), who identifies professional development as a key outcome of postgraduate education, as well as Lee and Boud (2003) and McAlpine and Amundsen (2011), who emphasize the transformative potential of graduate study. Similarly, Maviş-Sevim and Akın (2021) highlight the importance of implementing newly learned methods in practice. The presence of this emphasis across both groups suggests that success is closely linked to the perceived utility and relevance of learning.

External factors were also experienced as shaping students' sense of success. Personal-, family-, culture-, supervision-, field-, and profession-related reasons emerged as influential. Among personal-related reasons, time constraints and socio-economic challenges were prominent, as employed students struggled to allocate

time while unemployed students emphasized financial hardship, consistent with previous findings (Karadağ & Özdemir, 2017; Özmen & Güç, 2013).

Age was also experienced as a source of stress, as PhD students approaching full adulthood navigated expectations of entering the workforce alongside continuing their studies. In this context, lack of social support and family support were closely linked to financial concerns. Participants described feeling misunderstood by their social circles, particularly when explaining their student status at a later stage in life. Consequently, both material and emotional family support emerged as important in sustaining engagement with graduate education. Profession-oriented students also mentioned time-related challenges linked to home duties, lack of workplace incentives, and commuting burdens. Participant P12, for example, reflected that living with family rather than a spouse during graduate study might have yielded greater academic success. Others noted that the absence of institutional support from their employers negatively affected their engagement. For students who traveled between cities to attend classes, geographic separation posed additional difficulties. These findings supported that academic success cannot be fully understood in isolation from structural constraints. Rather than reflecting a lack of ability, many challenges stem from systemic barriers that require greater recognition.

Within *field-related reasons*, students cited *limited practical courses*, *restricted elective options*, *multidimensional growth*, and a desire for *self-driven learning* as key influences. They expressed a need for more practice-oriented content and curricular flexibility to align their education with evolving personal and professional goals. These observations suggest that the design and delivery of graduate programs play a central role in enabling or hindering student success.

Within culture-related reasons, gender roles, lack of social support, and inspirational academic exposure emerged as key influences. Participants described how the image of a scientist was often associated with masculinity, leading women to experience skepticism in pursuing graduate education. Some also noted a mismatch between societal expectations and their academic roles, feeling underestimated despite their adult status. Accordingly, encounters with academic role models regardless of gender served as powerful motivators. These findings echo Gillooly et al. (2021), who found that academic role models enhance students' academic self-efficacy and encourage persistence, particularly when these role models promote inclusivity.

Finally, supervisors, classmates, and other faculty members were experienced as significant in shaping academic success, with the supervisor emerging as the most influential. This aligns with Devine and Hunter (2016), who emphasize that supportive supervision reduces burnout and sustains engagement. Peer interactions were also described as important, with some participants positioning classmates as informal sources of guidance. While concerns about peer competence were noted, shared challenges were often experienced as motivating. In this sense, academic success appears to be shaped within a relational context, where support from both peers and faculty contributes to students' sense of belonging and persistence, consistent with Diogo et al. (2022). From this perspective, the findings also reflect the importance of diverse and engaged academic environments in supporting development, as suggested by Boud and Tennant (2006).

■ CONCLUSION

This study provided an in-depth exploration of how graduate students in educational sciences programs in Turkey conceptualize academic success and the multifaceted factors that affect their success. Using IPA, the study explored that success is not a static or universally defined outcome, but rather a dynamic, context-based experience shaped by academic, personal, professional, social, and cultural influences. The findings demonstrate that both profession-oriented and academia-oriented students defined success across academic, personal, professional, and socio-cultural domains. While academia-oriented participants highlighted academic identity, publishing, and specialization; profession-oriented students prioritized practical implementation, personal growth, and social recognition. This study also identified various factors influencing students' success either positively or negatively. Supervisors, other faculty members, and classmates were consistently experienced as enabling. However, personal circumstances, field-related limitations, and cultural expectations emerged as significant barriers. These findings emphasize that success in graduate education is not only the result of individual effort but is deeply shaped by institutional structures, social relationships, and lived experiences. In short, this study offers a deeper understanding of academic success in graduate education by highlighting the lived experiences and perspectives of graduate students in educational sciences.

Recommendations. The findings highlight the importance of adopting a more holistic perspective of student success in graduate programs, moving beyond conventional academic indicators. Programs should be organized around differentiated tracks that respond to students' diverse goals and needs, allowing both academically oriented and professionally oriented students to pursue pathways that align with their aspirations. In addition to supporting individual development, program designs should deliberately incorporate opportunities for meaningful peer interaction within classroom settings, fostering collaborative learning and mutual support. Strengthening supervisory practices through targeted training and institutional support can further enhance students' academic experiences. Moreover, addressing cultural and structural barriers such as gender roles and time constraints can foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all graduate students.

Limitations. This study is limited to the perspectives of graduate students from different programs and fields. While the sample provides diverse viewpoints, it is not intended to be representative of all graduate students. Generalization is not the aim of this type of research; rather, the goal is to offer rich, contextualized understandings of how students conceptualize success in graduate education. Despite this limitation, the cultural and contextual factors identified in this study offer valuable insights and directions for future research on graduate education.

Ethical approvals. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Social and Humanities Ethics Committee of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Decision No: 37/56, Date: 18 July 2025).

Conflict of Interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Generative AI Statement. During the preparation of this manuscript, generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language editing, grammar correction, and improving clarity of expression in English. The authors reviewed and revised all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and originality of the manuscript. No generative AI tool was used for data analysis, coding, interpretation of findings, or drawing conclusions.

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