

Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Education Faculty Articles and Research

Attallah College of Educational Studies

Spring 2021


The Politics of the Hero's Journey: A Narratology of American Special Education Textbooks

Elise Assaf

Jennifer James

Scot Danforth

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/education_articles

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

The Politics of the Hero's Journey: A Narratology of American Special Education Textbooks

Comments

This article was originally published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, volume 41, issue 2, in 2021.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Copyright

The authors

The Politics of the Hero's Journey: A Narratology of American Special Education Textbooks

Elise Assaf
California State University, Fullerton
Email: eassaf@fullerton.edu

Jennifer James
Chapman University
Email: james216@mail.chapman.edu

Scot Danforth
Chapman University
Email: danforth@chapman.edu

Keywords:

special education, narratology, narrative structure, critical discourse analysis, hero's journey, inclusion, special education textbooks

Abstract

This paper explores introduction to special education textbooks in order to illuminate how they portray the social and political work of special educators, especially in relation to disabled students and adults. This study analyzed five leading special education textbooks used in university teacher education programs using traditional methods of discourse analysis, including line-by-line coding and language-in-use with valuation. The analysis and coding tracked story plot components and characters associated with five phases evident in the narrative structure of a hero's journey: (1) the call to adventure, (2) supernatural aid, (3) threshold guardians, (4) trials and tribulations, and (5) the return. Discussions of the findings illustrate the problematic ways in which the textbooks create a heroic narrative of past and current elements tied to the field of special education.

Becoming a trained and licensed professional in one of the fields that often provide services for disabled persons – such as rehabilitation counseling, social work, and education - typically requires the completion of a university professional preparation program. Crucial to any professional preparation program is the first course, the introduction class that serves as a point of career embarkation, a moment combining recruitment and initiation into the profession that often includes an orientation to the purposes, social roles, and beliefs that give the profession a distinct identity. As an example to show the magnitude of the introduction class, the National Center for Educational Statistics reports that in 2016 a total of 259,489 students received an initial teaching credential in the United States, which means that all of those students were

required to take the Introduction to Special Education class in order to complete the credential program.

Service professions describe themselves as having a moral mission that enhances the lives of others and solves an identifiable set of social problems that other actors, organizations, and professions are unable to adequately address. For example, Hall, Quinn, and Golnick (2015, p. 7) open their introductory education text with the bold statement, "Teaching is a noble profession." Cox, Tice, and Long (2017, p. 3), in their textbook, describe social work as a "worthy profession" that exemplifies values of "(i)ntegrity, decency, honesty, and justice." Introductory professional textbook authors inevitably assert that their profession is doing ethically important work that clearly contributes to the improvement of individual lives and the enrichment of society.

The profession is often described in terms of an unassailable moral charge with little or no opportunity for students to question social relationships, political dynamics, and professional or client identities. Táboas-Pais and Rey-Cao (2012) found that textbooks are typically perceived by students as highly authoritative, presenting indisputable ideas and legitimizing a specific version of society. Brantlinger's (2006) study of Introduction to Special Education textbooks in the United States, the only analysis of its kind, argued that university instructors and students alike tend to defer obediently to the content and vision of the text.

This article examines "Introduction to Special Education" course textbooks in order to illuminate how they portray the social and political work of special educators, especially in relation to the disabled students and adults. Our interest engages how the authoritative professional preparation textbooks of the field of special education portray the social and political identities of special educators and disabled students within the landscape of schooling and educational work.

Our particular analytic focus is the chapter or section of the leading university textbooks that provide an initial overview of the history of the field of American special education. Virtually all introductory textbooks include a short historical section that describes how and why the field was founded and significant legal, policy, scientific, or practical developments over the years, typically culminating in a moral mandate to the professionals-in-training to carry the impressive tradition forward. Because the history chapter provides a narrative of the profession that highlights and praises what the authors view as the evident moral contributions of the field to education, society, and disabled persons in particular, this specific component of the introductory text is ideal for critical analysis ideology and values of the field.

Operating as a form of cultural critique, this analysis unearths the political and social assumptions at work in the ideological structure of the profession, opening up the values and politics of the field of special education to close examination through an interrogation of how university textbooks pass on traditions of professional identity and purpose. Given the fact that the history of special education is generally written as a sweeping narrative of how the field grew and changed over decades, our approach to this task is a form of narratology, a study designed specifically for the analysis of story.

In the first portion of this paper, we explain the methodological procedures followed in this study, including narratology as a theory and discourse analysis as the method. We describe narratology as a form of cultural analysis providing insight into the underlying narratives that drive the moral mission of the profession. We employ Campbell's (2004) notion of a hero's journey as a structural narrative archetype aligned with the plot and characters depicted in the textbook histories of American special education. The central character of the field of education, the special education teacher, is detailed in relationship to the central activities and values of the field. This analysis is wrapped up with an examination of the political characters and dynamics of the field of special education as depicted in the textbook histories. The critique of the way in which the hero's journey is presented within the textbooks concludes this paper. Withholding the critique to the conclusion allows for the initial analysis to display the hero's journey as it is structured in the texts, while still affording the opportunity to assess the political or ideological elements of the presentation of the field special education.

Narratology

Narratology aims to understand how narratives, texts, images, events, and cultural artifacts, among other elements, tell a story (Bal & Boheemen, 2009). The methods of narrative theory help to analyze and understand narratives. The use of narrative theory has foundations in modern linguistics that focuses on how basic linguistic elements become meaningful (Fludernik, 2006).

Narratives create hypothetical or figurative worlds where characters exist and interact with others and their surroundings (Fludernik, 2006). These typologies describe narrators, narratees, space, time, and acting personae while framing stories and structuring the plot. Narrative theory analyzes lyrical, dramatic, and epic differences, as well as focuses on typological, historical, and thematic issues (Fludernik, 2006). Narrative texts, specifically, allow a subject to *tell* a reader a story in a particular manner (Bal & Boheemen, 2009). The story does not consist solely of a narration, rather it can include an opinion, disclosure, connection, or description of some event or individual. Paradigms can examine what is being narrated or described within a text "to assess the ideological or aesthetic thrust of a narrative" (Bal & Boheemen, 2009, p. 9). Narratology analyzes the characteristics of these literary texts and their narrative functions to understand how they create meaning for those consuming the medium (Fludernik, 2006). Narratology opens up opportunities for interrogation of ideological structures and values operating through cultural beliefs, norms, and practices (Dwivedi, Nielsen, & Walsh, 2018).

Hero's Journey

The themes and imagery used to tell stories transcend time and are repeated in the telling of tales from generation to generation (Pinkola Estés, 2004). Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004) borrowed the term monomyth from James Joyce to represent this idea that different variations of the same heroic story are universally shared and become impressed into the human psyche. A society can find purpose and meaning in the shared monomyth, as the stories act as a unifying force (Pinkola Estés, 2004). The monomyth encourages individuals in a society to be resilient in the face of adversity and to live a life of courage. Campbell forwards the idea that through the monomyth of the heroic tale, individuals are encouraged to answer a higher

calling, which leads to a stronger work ethic in the individual. Collectively, this stronger work ethic influences the society and develops a shared ethos.

Campbell (2004) labels this "shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story" (p. 1) the hero's journey. The hero's journey is constant in that it consists of a three-act structure, focusing on the transformation of the main character from regular citizen to hero (Munier, 2014). However, the shape-shifting of each story occurs through the selection of sub-plots within each act. The sub-plots reflect the steps that must be taken in order to complete the main character's metamorphosis into a hero.

The three-acts of the hero's journey – separation, initiation, and return – forms the nucleus of the monomyth. In the separation phase, the Everyman as the protagonist hears the call to adventure sub-plot or "the signs of the vocation of the hero" (Campbell, 2004, p. 2). During the beginning phase, the Everyman is given the help of supernatural aids to see him through the hero's journey. The second phase is the initiation stage of the journey and is marked by trials and tribulation sub-plot(s) that the hero must overcome as rites of passage. The Everyman is visited by helpers to assist him through the hardships encountered on the journey to becoming a hero. Finally, the Everyman triumphantly returns to his community as the hero. The sub-plot of the reintegration into the community can prove to be the most difficult part of the journey, but this phase is indispensable in continuing the cycle that builds the ethos of the community.

Similarly, the history chapters of the special education textbooks serve as a calling to the heroic work of special education teachers. Not all pre-service teachers in the Introduction to Special Education course will heed the call. For those that have the work ethic and courage to answer the call, the history sections of the textbooks follow the pattern of the hero's journey to introduce pre-service teachers to the professional journey they will travel as a special education teacher. The hero's journey of the special education teacher that is shared through the history section of the Introduction to Special Education textbooks involves a call to adventure, the introduction of supernatural aides, helpers, and trials along the way to transformation. As Campbell (2004) asserts, the shared story of the hero's journey serves to illustrate that "we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero path (p. 23). The purpose of sharing the history through the familiar story of the hero's journey is to initiate potential special education educators into the ethos of the field and to enlighten pre-service teachers who do not take up the call to adventure with an appreciation for the specialized field of special education.

Method

This study analyzed five leading American special education textbooks used in university teacher education programs. We asked sales representatives from three leading publishing houses - McGraw-Hill Education, Pearson Education, and SAGE Publishing – to identify the best selling texts sold for this "Introduction to Special Education" course. Our focus was currently published texts. Additionally, we wanted to represent the longevity of some popular textbooks that have been sold in the United States for up to two decades with many updates and revisions. We determined that the texts identified in Table 1.1 (in alphabetical order by first author) were the publications most likely to be used in introduction to special education courses. Our analysis

focused on these five texts as broadly representative of the content and style of the larger introductory special education market.

Table 1.1

	Authors	Title	Publisher	Ed.	Year of Publication
Text 1	Gargiulo & Bouck	Special Education in Contemporary Society: An Introduction to Exceptionality	SAGE	6th	2018
Text 2	Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen	Exceptional Learners: An Introduction to Special Education	Pearson	14th	2018
Text 3	Smith, Tyler, & Skow	Introduction to Contemporary Special Education: New Horizons	Pearson	2nd	2017
Text 4	Taylor, Smiley, & Richards	Exceptional Students: Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century	McGraw Hill	3rd	2018
Text 5	Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren	Exceptional Lives: Special Education in Today's Schools	Pearson	8 th	2015

Data Coding and Analysis

Our data were of two types within these texts. First, we focused closely on the sections and chapters devoted to the history of special education. This was our primary linguistic target. Second, we analyzed these sections in relation to the structure, prose, citations, and content throughout the texts. Although the historical content of these texts was generally localized in a single section or chapter, additional content referring to the history were also scattered across the non-historical sections of the texts. Our analysis considered both of these two types of data in order to draw from the entire historical narrative provided by each book.

Traditional methods of discourse analysis were used, including line-by-line coding, as well as larger methods of examination such as language-in-use with valuation (Hakkola, 2019). Categories and themes focused on ways to generate insights about the situated histories special education textbooks communicated to prospective educators. Gee's (2001) tasks and tools of inquiry guided the analysis process, providing a method of coding and organization tied to implied significance, identities within a narrative world, and evidence of specific values tied to the role of a special educator. Quotes were categorized into themes apparent in the Hero's Journey (Munier, 2014). Trustworthiness was garnered through debriefing of data and research process, and corroborating evidence through triangulation of investigators (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

According to Gee (2001), discourse analysis "is based on the details of speech or writing that are arguably deemed *relevant* in the content, *and* that are relevant to the arguments the analysis is attempting to make" (original emphasis, pg. 136). Studies using discourse analysis focus on one aspect of the meaningful, physical features present within the text, taking into consideration the context and relevance of the language analyzed. People actively make meaning from words used

in various settings and contexts, combining associated meanings, lexicon, and semiotic resources in order to situate language (pg. 214) – in other words, actively understand the words or signs presented in order to understand the message being disseminated.

Narratological Analysis: The Special Education Hero's Journey

The analysis and coding tracked story plot components and characters associated with five phases evident in the narrative structure of a hero's journey: (1) the call to adventure, (2) supernatural aid, (3) threshold guardians, (4) trials and tribulations, and (5) the return. Discussions of the findings will illustrate the ways in which the textbooks create a heroic narrative of past and current elements tied to the field of special education.

Call to Adventure

As Munier (2014, p. 53) states, a catalyst occurs during the first act of a story that identifies a hero and calls that person to action, leaving his or her everyday world behind in order to embark on a journey into the unknown. The hero may find a message about an event or some other occurrence that catapults the character into the quest.

The textbooks analyzed for this study depict the initiation of the special educator's quest with a sense of romanticism and appealing optimism. Hallahan, Kauffman, and Pullen (2018) illustrate this idea by explaining that "The early years of special education were vibrant with the pulse of new ideas," (p. 11) and that "It isn't possible to read the words of Itard, Séguin, Howe, and their contemporaries without being captivated by the romance, idealism, and excitement of their exploits" (p. 11). The authors continue, stating that "The results they achieved were truly remarkable for their era. Today, special education remains a vibrant field in which innovations, excitement, idealism, and controversies are the norm" (p. 11). Smith, Tyler, and Skow (2017) frame the call to adventure the most explicitly, stating that, "Although laws provide the foundation for society's right and wrong actions, it is everyone's job to ensure social justice, where equity and equality are part of the day-to-day rhythm of life" (p. 9). These clarion calls filled with exciting purpose summon the special educator into meaningful, bold action within the hopeful stream of a thriving ethical tradition.

Supernatural Aid

According to Campbell (2004, p. 34), the supernatural aid is "the unsuspected assistance that comes to one who has undertaken his proper adventure". In the history section of the special education textbooks, the supernatural aid comes most notably in the form of effective professional practices and services, the evidence-based interventions and forms of educational action that are deemed valuable in the ethical scope of the quest. The first depiction of an intervention assisting a special education professional is the sensory training program developed by early nineteenth century French physician Jean Itard to civilize "The Wild Child," Victor (Garguilo & Bouck, 2017; Hallahan et al., 2018; Taylor, Smiley, & Richards, 2018). Hallahan et al. (2018) describes Itard as an almost magical figure whose instructional strategies centuries before the work of B. F. Skinner presaged the behavior modification tactics often used today in special education classrooms to help teachers manage student behavior. Itard is lauded as the

"The Father of Special Education" (Garguilo & Bouck, 2017, p. 15) in honor of his landmark pedagogical work.

"Many of the originators of special education were European physicians," (Hallahan et al., 2018, p. 10). The Hallahan et al. (2018) text provides a series of brief portraits of important historical figures in order to highlight the early intervention creators who initiated efforts to educate those that were considered *not normal*. This running record details the early progenitors who provided supernatural aides while also presenting the central journey challenge that the hero faces on the special education journey. As Hallahan et al. (2018) state, "The early leaders sought to normalize exceptional people to the greatest extent possible and confer on them the human dignity they presumably lacked" (p. 9).

Disabled students marked by burdensome, multifaceted need – described by Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Shogren (2015) as "the need for support created by a student's disability" (p. 26) – constituted the essential challenge to the capable hero who responds by gathering up the effective practices and services developed by the pioneers and leaders of the field. Garguilo and Bouck (2017) described the helpful aids as "related services...and additional services - such as assistive technology devices or interpreters for pupils with hearing impairments" that are "required if a student is to benefit from a special education" (p. 20). Armed with modes of assistance built or discovered by leaders and pioneers, the special educator is invited to the moral mission of bringing beneficial normality to those in need.

Special education and the role of special educators are presented in a manner that emphasizes the challenges to be faced and the need for professional interventions, or supernatural aids, to help educators in the field meet the needs of the students. Teachers are encouraged to rely on "the never-ending scientific advances pertaining to disabilities" (p. Hallahan et al., 2018, p. 17). The focus on the powerful role of interventions on the hero's journey positions special education "as a service" (Smith et al., 2017, p. 15) of scientific weight provided by the hero for the person greatly defined by need and problematic social status. The scope of the special educator's work is chiefly captured by the dependent binary of human need and intervention, as the special educator's effective actions are situated as the main ingredient of the educational success of disabled students.

Threshold Guardians

Characters that embark on a heroic journey need a mentor, "someone whose knowledge and wisdom are vital to the hero's transformation" (Munier, 2014, p. 54). The *sage advisors* are found in all of the textbooks, typically presented as key figures in the early efforts to create specialized education for disabled persons. The most common references to key figures included the above-mentioned Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, as well as Samuel Gridley Howe, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, and Elizabeth Farrell.

These figures are presented in quick portraits, brief descriptions of notable achievements, without any historical or cultural context. The length of the portraits varied from a sentence to just over a paragraph, meaning that the topics explained as significant contributions were not discussed at a length sufficient for fully explaining the nature of their actions or the social

problems they ostensibly solved. For example, the account of Itard in Smith et al. (2017) is described in less than a sentence: "Positive attitudes about the benefits of educating students with disabilities began to develop centuries ago with Itard's famous work in France during the late 1770s with the "Wild Child," Victor" (p. 14), whereas Taylor et al. (2018, p.13) explain Itard's work in four sentences.

The rhetorical result of depictions of luminaries in the field without sufficient historical context to situate their activities in relationship to the structures and activities of society at the time is an effect of timelessness and authority. These threshold guardians are offered as powerful, wise advisors standing like stone monuments in the town square, providing distant but powerful role models to the heroes on their quest. Perhaps the most reassuring aspect of their advisory role is the notion of undeniable success embodied in these eminent elders. Long before the current field of special education began, they idols were impacting disabled children in positive ways.

Only one text (Smith et al., 2017) included disability rights activists like Ed Roberts and Judy Heumann or any disabled persons among the respected sage advisors. The caption below the photo of Roberts states that he is "one of the founders of the disability rights movement, protesting for social justice for people with disabilities in the 1960s" (Smith et al., 2017, p.10). The message of this one text is that the wisdom of ages passed on to assist the hero deal with obstacles and calamities comes from disabled and nondisabled people. In contrast, four of the five texts did not locate any disabled persons in history as knowledgeable mentors to special educators on their journey. Across the history sections of all five texts, this single mention of disabled people very ably fighting for their dignity and inclusion in mainstream life rises as an odd moment when disabled people are not defined primarily as problematic reservoirs of deficits requiring professional assistance.

Trials and Tribulations

In addition to encountering mentors and advisors, the hero faces challenges that test her, hazards that call for tremendous skills and talents (Munier, 2014). The hero is described as benefitting from the assistance and wisdom of educational professionals and parents. This positions the hero as part of a team of adults, mostly professionals, who work to address student needs. But the historical narrative of the field of special education is primarily told as a story of persons other than special educators tackling the most significant tests to the development of the field. A variety of historical actors, including lawyers, legislators, and charitable associations, are represented as the main movers in developing the moral mission of the field.

Friends

After the mythological hero accepts the call to adventure, "the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give him magical aid (helpers)" (Campbell, 2004, p. 227). For the special education teacher on the journey, the magical aids involve a team of educational professionals, service providers, and parents collaborating in order for meaningful and effective education to take place (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2014).

Professionals take on a prominent role in the textbooks as aids to the teacher through portraying the students as needing specialized care and instruction. Lawyers, doctors, and educators are credited with gaining access to schools and society for people with disabilities. This idea is dated back to the pre-Revolutionary era in the Hallahan et al. (2014) textbook as they explain that "political reformers and leaders in medicine and education began to champion the cause of children and adults with disabilities, urging that these 'imperfect' 'incomplete' individuals be taught skills that would allow them to become independent, productive citizens" (p. 9). These professionals are described as advocating on behalf of people with disabilities and are, therefore, responsible for forward progress made in the fight for rights and opportunities in education. Taylor et al. (2018) bring this concept into the post-World War II years by adding parents of disabled children to the mix of potent actors: "As special education became more of a formal, identifiable professional field in the latter part of the 20th century, parents and other advocates sought the best programs possible for all exceptional students and wanted to ensure that their rights were not violated" (p. 15). Additionally, Gargiulo & Bouck (2017) assert that "litigation, legislation, and leadership at the federal level, coupled with political activism and parental advocacy, helped to fuel" growth in special education (p. 18).

The need for nondisabled people to act on behalf of people with disabilities extends beyond professional aids to government agencies and charity organizations. Hallahan et al. (2018) trace organizations of nondisabled people helping people with disabilities back to the 19th century. Eventually this led to the creation of "organized advocacy groups such as the National Association of Retarded Children and the United Cerebral Palsy Association" during the 1950s and 1960s (Taylor et al., 2018, p. 14). Parents and "politically powerful advocacy groups" (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017, p. 42) used the momentum of the 1960s civil rights movement in the U.S. to champion equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Litigation

On the journey to becoming a hero, there is a distinct road of trials and tribulations that must be navigated as a rite of passage (Campbell, 2004). The trials that special educators must learn to navigate include the legal results of many court trials that form the foundation for the laws that govern the special education field. All five texts expend ample page space to lists and brief descriptions of historic court cases that led to the creation of laws related to the education of students with disabilities. These court cases are often described without explanation of the social and political situations and events necessitating legal action. Described in isolation, the case representations often consist of just the ruling and brief implication for the field.

The five textbooks highlight the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case as a legal cornerstone of the field. Although the court case does not specifically address exclusion from public education for students with disabilities, it established precedence for racial desegregation in public schools (Smith et al., 2017, p. 12). The term *desegregation*, in this usage, is limited to bringing disabled students into public school buildings while failing to address the ways those persons are commonly segregated into isolated classrooms and programs. This neglect aligns with the general tendency in these texts to ignore or even oppose inclusive education.

Legislation

Key pieces of legislation are focused on in the texts, explaining the efforts made by government authorities to foster a school environment that is intended to be equal and fair for all. The history of each legislative action, however, is described in a manner that eliminates the context and events that precipitated the act being lobbied for and passed. The acts are discussed in a manner in which little background information, if any, accompanies the explanation of the law.

Additionally, it should be noted that the emphasis of the history of special education is placed heavily on the legislative acts enacted throughout the last 45 years. Significant portions of the chapters on the history of special education are dedicated to these acts. It is evident that the amount of space, irrespective of the commentary, places great emphasis on the government's authority and role in mandating rights and requirements of special education. Several legislative acts are presented as major efforts made by politicians and government bodies to assist those with disabilities. As Taylor et al. (2018, pp. 16-17) state, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112, Section 504) was passed "as an attempt to end education and job discrimination on the basis of a person's disability." The authors continue by explaining, "Essentially, this law stated that no otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States could be excluded from participation in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance based solely on his or her handicap." Smith et al. (2017, p. 77) specifies Section 504 in their text, stating that it "is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination. It does not provide funding to support the education of eligible students; rather, schools that do not comply can lose their federal funding."

None of the descriptions of Section 504 tell the history of how disabled activists occupied the federal building in San Francisco for over three weeks to force the Carter administration to enact the law. None of the texts frame the first anti-discrimination law in the narrative context of a civil rights movement fought for decades by disabled people seeking inclusion and dignity. None of the descriptions explore how a non-discrimination law might be connected to decades of efforts to create inclusive schools that educate disabled and non-disabled students in the same classrooms.

The federal mandate that created and funded the modern field of special education is celebrated in all five texts. The Education for All Handicapped Students Act was a landmark federal law passed in 1975 and amended in 1990 to become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 1997, the law was amended again, but its name was not changed (see Bateman & Linden (2006) and Yell (2012) for details)" (Hallahan et al., 2018, p. 13). According to Taylor et al. (2018), the act "is the most significant piece of legislation related to special education to date," providing "guidelines, requirements, and funding for the education of exceptional students" (p. 17).

All of the texts document the landmark 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). According to Hallahan et al. (2018, p. 19), the ADA "is essentially a civil rights act for individuals with disabilities." The authors explain that the act does not require employers to incur "undue expenses," stating that "...employers can be creative. For example, rather than replace a water fountain that is out of reach for an employee in a wheelchair, an employer could simply provide paper cups" (p 19). Smith et al. (2017) frame the act differently, focusing on the community engagement of individuals with disabilities because of the daily aspects they now have access to:

These changes allow more people with disabilities to be included in all aspects of daily life. As a consequence, more people live with greater independence and have possibilities for full community participation. For example, they go to cafés with friends, enjoy drinks after work, see movies at their local theaters, and even travel the world. They live in houses and apartments in the community and commute to and from work. (p. 23)

Overall, the narrative of laws and court cases dominates the textbooks' articulation of the history of the field, casting the hero's journey as both propelled by and ensconced within legal prescriptions, authorizations, and limitations. The path of the hero is paved with a complex array of legal pronouncements that make the hero's work possible while also placing limitations of what the special educator can actually do. The moral mission of the field, portrayed in this light, is greatly one of adherence to the laws, rules, and regulations of a complex governmental bureaucracy, a managerial system designed to keep school districts and professionals out of legal jeopardy.

Disabled citizens as agentic and strategic actors in these legal developments are missing from these narratives. The prominent role of disabled Americans in the passage of Section 504 and the ADA, in particular, is diminished. Similarly, the way that those two civil rights laws position disabled citizens as equal participants in an inclusive society is understated.

Students as tribulation

As the history sections of these texts narrate the role of helpers, litigation, and legislation supporting the hero's journey, the students with disabilities are generally portrayed as a daily tribulation. The greatest obstacle the hero must face is the students themselves. Throughout the history sections, students with disabilities are depicted as needing to be cared for by others and, thus, a burden on the teachers and schools. Hallahan et al. (2018) assert that students with disabilities will need intensive and specialized instruction, often in separate classrooms, to help the students "meet their academic potential" (p. 12). Students are depicted as needing to be sequestered in order to receive an appropriate education. Garguilo and Bouck (2017) write that working "as an inclusive teacher in the age of accountability becomes increasingly difficult each year" as general education teachers need the support and expertise of special education teachers for students with IEPs. Students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms are depicted as a problem general educators cannot handle without help from skilled special education teachers.

A variety of nondisabled people and organizations are portrayed as advocating and providing care for students with disabilities. The chiefly passive recipients of the competent actions of these nondisabled helpers are the disabled students. For example, Turnbull et al. (2015) states that advocates for students with disabilities were primarily "their families, parent advocacy organizations, and civil rights lawyers" (p. 9) in the pursuit of educational opportunities for the students. Taylor et al. (2018) asserts that toward the end of the twentieth century, as special educators became an integral part of K - 12 education, "parents and other advocates sought the best programs possible for all exceptional students and wanted to ensure that their rights were not violated" (p. 15). This depicts an antagonistic relationship between the schools and parents with special educators in the middle. The battle for student rights involved the schools, special

education teachers, advocates, and parents. In this way, disability itself is rendered as a characterological lack of agency and competency. Disabled people receive care, and the caregivers are parents, teachers, lawyers, and outside agencies, such as the government or charity organizations (Garguilo & Bouck, 2017; Hallahan et al., 2018; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Even after disabled students outgrow school and enter adult life, the textbook histories primarily frame them as a burden on society needing continual assistance from others. In Turnbull et al. (2015) the education provided by special educators may not be enough to integrate students into society because "prejudice against people with disabilities may still limit opportunities for students to show that, although they have a disability, they are nonetheless still able" (p. 27). Special educators cannot prepare students for a biased society, so government agencies are depicted as a necessary intermediary to protect and provide care for people with disabilities or else they become a burden on society. For example, Hallahan et al. (2018) assert that "many people who formerly would have been in institutions are now homeless or in jail" (p. 11). As an alternative to institutions, transitional living homes are available for people with disabilities (p. 11). Institutions and transitional living facilities are funded by the government. Providing care for people with disabilities that are homeless also takes government funds for services. In this narrative, once the special education teachers are no longer able to care for the students, the government must step in to provide for the disabled adult person's basic needs.

Return

The return from the journey and reintegration back into civilization is the hardest part of the voyage for the hero. Not all heroes, despite their success on the quest, can return home to a society that recognizes their achievements. It is possible for the hero to be met "with such a blank misunderstanding and disregard from those whom he has come to help that his career will collapse" (Campbell, 2004, p. 35). The frustration a special education teacher experiences upon the return from the journey is represented as the lack of future opportunities and success for students with disabilities. The textbooks do not describe possibilities of a promising future awaiting for the students with disabilities after they leave the services of the special educator. They often depict people with disabilities needing to be cared for into adulthood. Even with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in place, people with disabilities are still portrayed as typically not achieving economic and social success in society (Hallahan et al., 2018; Turnbull et al., 2015).

The statistics used in the textbooks, along with the description of options available to students with disabilities after high school, focus on the fierce challenges students will face as adults. For example, the statistics used in the Turnbull et al. (2015) textbook show a grim picture of adulthood and provide further credence to idea that society will have to provide support throughout the lifespan of a person with disabilities:

Slightly more than half of adults with disabilities report that they are struggling financially (living paycheck to paycheck, going into debt) compared with one-third of people without disabilities (58 percent versus 34 percent). Approximately one-fifth of adults with disabilities report going without needed health care compared with one-tenth of people without disabilities (19 percent versus 10 percent). Adults with disabilities are approximately twice as likely to have

inadequate transportation than people without disabilities (34 percent versus 16 percent). Slightly more than half of adults with disabilities report accessing the Internet compared with the vast majority of adults without disabilities (54 percent versus 85 percent). (p. 25)

These negative numbers that present a seemingly unavoidable life of poverty and isolation for people with disabilities. Statistics that detail favorable outcomes related to careers, health, and relationships are not listed. The absence of positive statistics depicts a bleak future for students with disabilities and places serious limitations of the apparent effectiveness of the heroic special educator.

The textbooks primarily end the discussion of education at secondary school level. Opportunities for careers or post-secondary education are often not explored. Turnbull et al. (2015) highlights the options available to students through the Rehabilitation Act, which include vocational assistance in finding a job and financial aid for job training. These services are provided by the state rehabilitation agency, once again emphasizing the theme of dependency and government support.

Smith et al. (2017) is the only textbook analyzed that provides information about post secondary education options for students with disabilities. They include statistics that state that "almost 11% of all undergraduates have a disability" (p. 22) and that this number is continuing to increase. Further, the authors include statistics for people with disabilities earning advanced degrees: "In 2013, people with disabilities earned 5.8% of all doctoral degrees" (p. 22). The authors highlight universities that have developed special programs and accommodations for people with disabilities to help students achieve successful outcomes. For example, the authors praise Iowa State University for their development of a dormitory for students with intellectual disabilities that enable them to live on campus while attending classes that develop independent living skills.

Conclusion

Tapping the ideological level of assumptions made about social identities and the political relationships between categories of persons requires examining both the social roles inhabited by groups in the hero's narrative and the political relationships between those group identities. The main characters in question in the historical narrative of the hero are the special education teachers, the disabled students, disabled adults, and general educators. Interpreting the content of each of these characters as portrayed in the hero's journey narrative, discerning degrees of social valuation for each, allows us to understand how these textbooks index the social status of these participants. Additionally, by exploring the power dynamics of the relationships between these character types, the political assumptions of the texts are displayed.

Overall, the history section of the textbooks rarely describes the special education teacher as a person of agency, talent, and courage. The primary victories of the hero's narrative are achieved by other persons; by the fantastic historical figures who developed effective interventions that have been passed down, by the parent advocates and lawyers who fought to win the key court cases that created the juridical underpinnings of the field, by the legislators and government leaders who passed the landmark laws. The narrative of the historical development of the field

ignores the work and ingenuity of actual classroom teachers – special and general educators - working every day in American schools. The hero is primarily positioned as the receiver of wisdom and knowledge created and passed on by people who did not work in American public schools.

The special education hero is depicted as having limited intellectual and practical resources for use in tackling the challenges of the journey. While all heroes must turn to other persons for mentorship and assistance, is it noteworthy that special education teachers are called upon to seek wisdom and guidance primarily from people who are not special education teachers. Authority, knowledge, and agency are greatly vested in a series of other figures, predominantly white men of professions other than education, beginning with Jean Itard and the other early mentors and including the lawyers who fought crucial court cases and the legislators who passed pivotal laws that furthered the field. Other than Elizabeth Farrell, the early 1900s leader of ungraded classes in New York City, public school special education teachers, women, and persons of color do not occupy roles of knowledge and wisdom in the hero's narrative.

While professionals, broadly speaking, play roles as helpers to the special educators, general education teachers specifically gain little or no mention. The research and practical literature on inclusive education has generally given general educators a large and substantial role to play in the inclusion of disabled students. Often they are described as capable and innovative instructors working in close alliances with special educators (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Valle & Connor, 2019). The lack of a substantive pedagogical role in the hero's narrative reflects the overall inattention given to inclusive education by these five leading special education textbooks.

Three texts attend to inclusive education, all approaching decades of research and practical development around the world with great hesitance and doubt. None mention the Salamanca Statement, Education for All, or UNESCO's efforts around the world to foster inclusive schooling. Smith et al. (2017) discuss inclusion in one paragraph and recommend it with lukewarm support. Gargiulo and Bouck (2017) devoted two and a half pages to inclusive education, refer to it as "a trend", and present it as a contentious issue mainly with advocates on both sides. They offer no information on research about successful inclusive teaching practices. Instead, they conclude that inclusive schools may well be a violation of current federal law because they do not offer a cascade of placement options. Hallahan et al. (2018) supply one page on "normalization, deinstitutionalization, and inclusion". Two paragraphs (about half the page) discuss inclusion as the most controversial issue growing out of normalization. The section ends with:

We can't overemphasize the importance of intensive instruction in meeting the needs of exceptional learners. In our opinion, exceptional children should be placed where such instruction is most likely to be provided, even if that place is somewhere other than the general education classroom. It is critical that inclusion in the general education setting full time should not be at the expense of the specialized instruction that is required to help students with disabilities meet their academic potential. (p. 12)

By the final phase of the journey, the teacher's heroic potential is limited by the bleak future prospects of the disabled students living as adults in the community. This failure is twofold. First, the disabled students throughout history are framed as a problem to be solved by others, as bundles of needs and flaws requiring support and correction. They are characters without interests and desires, without agency and the ability to make decisions in control of their lives, without talents and contributions to make to society. They are depicted as unable to succeed as adults. Second, the clock on the special educator's challenge addressing the disabled students' deficits and needs through interventions runs out as the students leave the protective confines of the public school. The special educator's journey and hero status remain unfulfilled because the legal guard rail precludes providing services and supports beyond age twenty one. Adulthood, for disabled people in America, is a wasteland, and the hero cannot venture there to provide more assistance.

The failure of the hero to return home in the final stage is due to an ongoing professional lament about how infrequently disabled adults are included in the mainstream economic and social life of American society. This opens up a question about the inclusion of disabled persons in society and schools. Somehow inclusion in the public school is an unimportant or suspect activity, but inclusion in the great society during adult life is a laudable goal. None of the texts examine how the practice of greatly segregating disabled young people during their schooling experiences might be related to the lack of successful inclusion of disabled adults throughout society.

Finally, disabled students are often dehumanized through a characterization that positions them as problematic packages of abnormalities and needs that trouble the community and burden the teacher. If the journey is an obstacle course of difficult terrain that the hero must traverse, the students themselves are represented as a challenging array of pitfalls, quicksand, and hidden traps.

The disabled student is described primarily as a person without agency. Despite the well developed research literature on self-determination that clearly articulates a central role for students in making important decisions about their learning, friendships, and future, the history sections of these textbooks generally objectify disabled students as unfortunate bundles of onerous needs, not as persons with strengths, desires, abilities, and volition (e.g. Wehmeyer, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015).

Similarly, disabled adults, other than a slight credit for activities during the disability rights movement, are either drawn in stereotyped, two dimensional terms or absent altogether. Although one of the texts briefly mentions the achievements of disabled adults in America in leading the disability rights movement that created opportunities for them to have great control over their lives and achieve more equality in society, none of the books give serious attention to the history of disabled adults. This lacuna depoliticizes disability in society while ignoring the significant achievements of disabled adults in all aspects of society. The adult disability persona is less of a character in the narrative than a dire warning of what unsuccessful public schools students with disabilities might become in the future. A satisfying and successful life for a disabled person outside the safe confines of the support and assistance of the heroic professional is barely within the imagination of these texts.

References

- Bal, M., & Boheemen, C. (2009). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (3rd ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Black-Hawkins, K., & Florian, L. (2012) Classroom teachers' craft knowledge of their inclusive practice. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(5), 567–584.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2012.709732>
- Brantlinger, E. (2006) *Who benefits from special education?:Remediating (fixing) other people's children* (Mahwah, NJ, Erlbaum). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617309>
- Campbell, J. (2004). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Cox, L. E., Tice, C. J., & Long, D. D. (2018). *Introduction to social work: An advocacy-based profession (Social Work in the New Century)* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Dwivedi, D., Henrik Skov Nielsen, H. S., & Walsh, R. (2018) *Narratology and ideology: Negotiating context, form, and theory in postcolonial narratives*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>
- Fludernik, M. (2006). *An introduction to narratology*. London: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203882887>
- Gargiulo, R. M., & Bouck, E. C. (2018). *Special education in contemporary society: An introduction to exceptionality* (6th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203847886>
- Hall, G. E., Quinn, L. F., & Gollnick, D. M. (2015). *Introduction to teaching: Making a difference in student learning* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Hallahan, D. P., Kauffman, J. M., & Pullen, P. C. (2018). *Exceptional learners: An introduction to special education* (14th ed.). NY, NY: Pearson.
- Hakkola, L. (2019). Obstacles and pathways: A critical discourse analysis of diversity in college recruiting. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000111>
- Munier, P. (2014). *Plot perfect: How to build unforgettable stories scene by scene*. Cincinnati, OH: Writers Digest Books.
- Pinkola Estés, C. (2004). Introduction. In *The hero with a thousand faces* (Commemorative ed., Vol. 17, pp. xxiii-lxv). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Rifenbark, G. G., & Little, T. (2015) Relationships between self-determination and postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities. *Journal of Special Education*, 48, 4, 256-267.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466913489733>
- Smiley, L. R., Richards, S. B., & Taylor, R. L. (2018). *Exceptional students: Preparing teachers for the 21st century* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

- Smith, D. D., Tyler, N. C., & Skow, K. (2017). *Introduction to contemporary special education: New Horizons* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson.
- Táboas-Pais, M. I., & Rey-Cao, A. (2012). Gender differences in physical education textbooks in Spain: A content analysis of photographs. *Sex Roles*, 67(7-8), 389-402. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0174-y>
- Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Shogren, K. A. (2015). *Exceptional lives: Special education in today's schools* (8th ed.). New York: Pearson.
- Valle, J. W. & Connor, D. J. (2019) *Rethinking disability: A disability studies guide to inclusive practices*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315111209>
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (2015) Framing the future: Self-determination. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36, 1, 20-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932514551281>

[Return to Top of Page](#)

Copyright (c) 2021 Elise Assaf, Jennifer James, Scot Danforth



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Volume 1 through Volume 20, no. 3 of *Disability Studies Quarterly* is archived on the [Knowledge Bank site](#); Volume 20, no. 4 through the present can be found on this site under [Archives](#).

Beginning with Volume 36, Issue No. 4 (2016), *Disability Studies Quarterly* is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives license](#) unless otherwise indicated.

Disability Studies Quarterly is published by [The Ohio State University Libraries](#) in partnership with the [Society for Disability Studies](#).

If you encounter problems with the site or have comments to offer, including any access difficulty due to incompatibility with adaptive technology, please contact libkbhelp@lists.osu.edu.

ISSN: 2159-8371 (Online); 1041-5718 (Print)