

“WHAT’S YOUR SUPERPOWER?”: CHALLENGING THE
TEACHER-AS-SUPERHERO METAPHOR

by

Andrew Entzenberger

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Amber Esping, Ph.D.

Department of Education

Gabriel Huddleston, Ph.D.

Department of Education

ABSTRACT

This project grapples with the phrase "I'm a teacher; what's your superpower?" The qualitative study examines the narrative of a preservice physical education teacher with a learning disability against the narratives of superheroes using Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, also known as the Hero's Journey (1949). The subject's narrative yielded four distinct cycles of separation, initiation, and return consistent with cycles found in superhero narratives. It appears that the preservice teacher routinely faced a trial, overcame it with both outside assistance and personal experience, and applied the knowledge and skills gained to any proceeding trials. In this way, the preservice teacher's narrative does align with the narratives of superheroes. While this present study is qualitative and only describes in detail the function of a certain teacher's narrative, the implications are such that other preservice teachers should be able to apply the concept of multiple journeys to their own practice, giving them a tool for self-reflection and a way to develop skills like empathy and humility, which are much more realistic superpowers.

“What’s Your Superpower?”: Challenging the Teacher as Superhero Metaphor

During the holiday season of 2017, myself and a few of my fellow preservice teachers gathered for a Christmas party and exchanged gifts. One of the gifts I received from a fellow teacher was a comically oversized mug with the inscription: “I’m a teacher; what’s YOUR superpower?” Indeed, many educators are of the mindset that their profession is a noble calling and deserves to be recognized by the mainstream as such. While I agree with the spirit of this sentiment, in my opinion these heroic sentiments may be viewed as self-aggrandizing, preventing teachers from being taken seriously by other professionals; true heroes probably don’t need to advertise the fact.

Rather than dismiss the notion that teachers are superheroes, though, I want to investigate this claim to reveal any underlying truth. After all, how did the idea that teachers are heroes without capes become so captivating if it has no substance? This study will use the framework of the Hero’s Journey as proposed by Joseph Campbell (1949) to interrogate the “teacher as superhero” simile. Campbell’s model of the Hero’s Journey will serve as a bridge, linking interview data from an arguably “heroic” preservice teacher with a learning disability to the narratives of superheroes in pop culture. This will establish an empirical context for the interrogating the proposition that teaching is indeed a superpower.

Literature Review

Joseph Campbell and the Hero’s Journey

In his 1949 work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell outlined a theory that all mythologies feature central characters or heroes who follow the same cyclical pattern of development and growth throughout a narrative. Campbell labeled this phenomenon the “monomyth” (a term borrowed from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*) and elucidated seventeen

separate events present in every monomythic narrative. Each of these seventeen events takes place within one of three main stages in a hero's journey, posits Campbell: Separation, Initiation, and Return. Campbell qualifies the monomyth by stating that not every hero experiences every event within the monomyth; rather, the monomyth describes the general steps a hero takes in his or her path towards successfully completing his or her quest. When viewed as a loose framework rather than a rigid script, the monomyth becomes a pathway for individual reflection and a tool for analysis across academic and vocational disciplines (Goldstein, 2005; Sonnenburg & Runco, 2017).

While Joseph Campbell's work centered around cultural myths from classical history, his theory has influenced contemporary literature and storytelling about heroes. Indeed, many modern books and films owe their iconic plotlines and characters to Campbell's inspiration. George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* Universe, has famously said that his narrative of the fictitious Skywalker family is largely derived from Campbell's theory of the hero's journey, stating "When I did 'Star Wars' I consciously set about to recreate myths and the — and the classic mythological motifs. And I wanted to use those motifs to deal with issues that existed today" (Moyers, 1999). Lucas goes on to explicate how details such as the colors of lightsabers, the planets on which the characters live, and the technology of the galaxy far, far away are all in service of the theme of benevolent heroes striving against evil forces without and within. Furthermore, screenwriter Christopher Vogler asserts that not only *Star Wars* but many other movies, including *Jaws*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and even *Beverly Hills Cop*, all possess markers suggestive of Campbell's hero's journey. Using an abbreviated version of Campbell's original 17-step cycle, Vogler argues that not only are many modern movies across genres influenced by and patterned after the hero's journey, but future screenwriters can continue to be successful by

following this model (2007). This argument is echoed by Stuart Voytilla (1999), who draws connections between Campbell and Vogler's models of the hero's journey and fifty films from the twentieth century, spanning such genres as action and adventure, horror, western, and even romantic comedy.

Superheroes and the Monomyth

One significant impact that Joseph Campbell's monomyth has had on popular culture is its influence on the stories of superheroes. Superheroes, and in particular superhero films, are seeing a spike in popularity over the last twenty years. Four of the top ten and eight of the top thirty-six films of all time as measured by gross earnings are superhero films featuring one or multiple superheroes from Marvel or DC Comics (Box Office Mojo, 2018). All of those films were released within the last twenty years. In his book *Supergods*, Grant Morrison provides one possible explanation for why superheroes have become so popular in the cultural milieu. He writes, "We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can analyze them out of existence, kill them, ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish we could be" (2011). Indeed, the practices of re-writing superheroes to reflect societal mores has been well documented in comic book runs and is indicative of the ways in which fictitious superheroes function as a metaphor for the ideal citizen of the society by which they are created. If a superhero who acts and talks like the reader can change the world, then a similar, less fantastical outcome might still be possible for the reader (Allison & Goethals, 2017).

While created superheroes vary widely in their personality and behavior, almost all of them demonstrate specific markers of the hero's journey. One example is Superman, one of the most famous and recognizable superheroes of all time. Superman as iterated in the 1978 film

Superman: The Movie experiences all three monomythic events: separation, initiation, and return. First, Kal-El is separated from his home world of Krypton and his father in order to gain understanding of his unique genetic ability to perform miracles on Earth and be a benevolent servant of humans; later, as Clark Kent, Kal is initiated into his full Kryptonian powers by a hologram of his father in a fortress hidden in the Arctic Circle; finally, Kal emerges as Superman, fully equipped to protect humans from natural disasters and man-made tyranny (Stucky 2016). And Superman is not the only famous superhero to follow Campbell's monomythic cycle: members of the contemporary superhero collective The Avengers bear superficial similarities to Greek gods like Athena, Apollo, Perseus, Hercules, Hephaestus, and others (Hafci 2017) who all have well-documented myths which ooze with monomythic archetypes; not to mention that Thor of Marvel Comics fame comes directly from Norse mythology. Combining these observations with Vogler's (2007) instruction for writing screenplay using the hero's journey, it is easy to see that the monomythic mythologies of centuries past have bled into the superhero narratives of today.

Batman and the Monomyth

Perhaps one of the most famous and oft-cited superhero origin stories is that of Batman. Created by Bob Kane in 1939 (Huddleston 2016), Bruce Wayne, a young and affluent heir, assumes the moniker of Batman after his parents are assassinated by the mob. Vowing to serve justice to every criminal in Gotham, Wayne uses his wealth to fund experimental weapons, equipment, and a state-of-the-art combat suit in order to combat injustice (Huddleston 2016). While many iterations of his origin story have been rehashed in comics, the 2005 film *Batman Begins* (Kane, Goyer, Nolan, & Goyer 2005) is a definitive representation of the titular character that explores his internal motivations for fighting crime and clearly outlines his origin story.

In the film, a young Bruce Wayne develops a phobia of bats after falling down a well and being caught in a swarm of bats. Later, Bruce attends an opera with his parents and, upon seeing characters dressed as bats, requests to leave the theater. Leaving through a side entrance, the Wayne family is attacked by a lone gunman, and after a short exchange Mr. and Mrs. Wayne are murdered in front of Bruce. Feeling immense guilt over the murders of his parents, and realizing how deep the roots of crime spread in his hometown, Bruce embarks on a soul search to better understand the minds of criminals. Landing in a jail in Bhutan, Bruce is confronted by a shadowy elder named Ra's al Ghul who vows to teach Bruce how to truly exact revenge on his hometown criminals. Ra's and his elite team, the League of Shadows, quickly teach Bruce how to become a modern ninja. After his training is complete, a moral schism with the League of Shadows takes Bruce back to Gotham, where he quickly hones his new skills. Combining his elite martial talents with the advanced technology afforded him by his late father's booming business Wayne Enterprises, Bruce becomes Batman, defender of Gotham.

In this narrative, we see many distinctive markers of Joseph Campbell's monomyth. From the moment Bruce's parents are murdered, the young Wayne feels the call to avenge his parents' death. His encounter with Carmine Falcone is the push he needs to cross the first threshold and begin his separation. After departing from Gotham and landing in prison in Bhutan, Bruce is offered the opportunity to become a member of the League of Shadows. Throughout his initiation, Bruce is gaining valuable skills that he will use in his future as the masked vigilante of Gotham. And while Bruce believes he will be inducted into this group of stealth warriors, his refusal to abide by their misguided moral code is his apotheosis, representing his enlightenment as an honorable warrior who will redeem Gotham instead of inciting its demise. His destruction of the temple of the League of Shadows and subsequent return to

Gotham, then, can be read as a crossing of the return threshold. Emerging as Batman, Bruce has become Campbell's master of two worlds and is exercising his freedom to live by fighting injustice in Gotham in the way that he sees fit.

In this way, the first act of Christopher Nolan's Batman origin story already includes a full cycle of the hero's journey. But what makes the journey a cycle is that once the hero returns with his boon or ultimate reward, he is often sent again on a new journey, ready to learn more or change yet again to face a new obstacle. Batman undergoes such a continuation of the hero's journey. Establishing himself as a force to be reckoned with in Gotham, Batman gains notoriety as he continues to put away criminal after criminal. Eventually, he receives a call to action when it is discovered that the psychologist Jonathan Crane is pulling strings behind the scenes to keep his own criminal activity running despite Batman's purge. When Batman confronts Crane, he is confronting one of the monsters on the road of trials towards the ultimate clash. His birthday party confrontation with the revealed Ra's al Ghul resembles a sort of atonement with the father, where Bruce realizes that he and the League of Shadows are at complete odds and must fight to the death. Alfred's rescue of Bruce from his burning building is a textbook rescue from without, only for Batman to pursue Ra's in a chase that functions as a sort of reverse magic flight, with Batman using all of his knowledge and skill hereto acquired to shut down the League of Shadows' plan and kill Ra's al Ghul for good. After this crossing of the return threshold, Bruce once again becomes the master of two worlds, cementing himself as the rightful heir to the Wayne legacy and as Gotham's Dark Knight. In these ways, Batman proves to be the exemplar of a contemporary superhero treading the hero's journey, continually becoming.

Teacher As Superhero

Several writers have applied Campbell's monomyth to the domain of education (see Goldstein, 2005; Sonnenburg & Runco, 2017; Randles 2017). Lisa Goldstein describes how she used Campbell's monomyth to help preservice teachers frame their own experiences in the classroom. By identifying themselves as heroic figures through their growth and progression through the journey, Goldstein's students were able to find some utility in the application of the hero's journey to their own educational contexts. Not only could professional or preservice educators use the hero's journey as a tool for self-reflection as individuals who will be serving others in a tangible way, but they might also be able to view the hero's journey as an outline for the trajectory of their careers. Randles (2017) describes this latter use of the monomyth in his article on music educators. First, in the ordinary world, educators are encouraged not to challenge the status quo and simply teach what they have been taught. Eventually, through individual realization or some apparent crisis, the educator may realize that not every population is being served the way it should be or can be by the system as it is. While some educators might refuse the call and insist that changing the system is too lofty of a goal, others will accept the call and, at the insistence and encouragement of mentors and other educators, assert their goals for educational revolution. Trials will present themselves in the forms of educational administrators and bureaucrats who insist that the status quo cannot be changed, uncooperative colleagues or parents, and difficulties encountered when theorizing new curricula. At this point, Randles asserts that educators must unite to form a hero collective, emboldening one another with shared resolve to press on for the sake of serving those who are currently excluded from musical and educational participation. Once this collective is formed, the educators have a better chance of

surviving a final ordeal or confrontation and bringing back fruitful changes to curriculum that make the music classroom a better place to teach and learn (Randles 2017).

Randles uses his metaphor of a hero collective to encourage teamwork amongst music educators for the purpose of significant change and support for fine arts curriculum. However, it seems that the cycle of the hero's journey might also apply to lone educators looking to make a difference in their individual contexts. The call to adventure for an educator might be the call to make a marked difference in the life of a student or students, especially a difference that was not previously felt in the educator's own educational experiences. The first step for that educator is then to separate from their current world and enter into a teacher certification program. The preservice teacher may have other teachers, educators, or administrators in his corner as mentors, giving him advice and helping him navigate the treacherous landscape of educational policy, bureaucracy, and required coursework. While the teacher will certainly face these trials, she will ideally use all of the knowledge she acquires in certification to pass a final exam and experience apotheosis in graduation. After this final certification, the newly anointed teacher will return to a classroom changed and equipped with the knowledge required to make another student's school experience better than his own. In this way, there exists a window to observe the teacher as a superhero through the bridge of Joseph Campbell's monomyth.

Method

Research Questions

In researching the similarities of preservice teachers with learning disabilities and superheroes, the researcher was interested in the following question: How does the narrative of a preservice physical education teacher with a learning disability compare to the narratives of superheroes?

Participant Demographics and Recruitment

The participant, called Jack for anonymity, is a 27-year old male preservice teacher enrolled in his junior year of college. He identifies as Caucasian and indicates a religious preference of Christian. The participant grew up in an urban environment and a working-class family, and attended public school from kindergarten through high school. At an early age he was diagnosed with one or more learning disabilities, but their precise nature was never explained (or adequately explained) to Jack. At the time of the interview, the participant was studying to be a physical education (P.E.) teacher in a secondary school.

Setting

The setting for the current study is the College of Education at a private liberal arts university located in an urban metroplex in the southern United States. Jack's interview was also conducted within the College of Education at this university. At the time of the study, university enrollment was reported at 7,640 undergraduates, 325 of whom were students in the College of Education. Approximately 41% of undergraduates were male, 73% of undergraduates were white, and 74% of undergraduates were from the state in which the university is located. The participant of the study fit all three of these descriptors.

Procedure

Data Sources Data was collected from the transcript of a single, semi-structured interview conducted with Jack. The interview lasted approximately two hours. The researcher transcribed the interview verbatim and combined it with the interview protocol to form an interview transcript. The researcher omitted specific names in the participant's responses, such as his prior institutions of higher learning, his prior workplaces, and his other professors, in order to

maintain anonymity. The researcher also annotated the interview to indicate breaks in the dialogue, as in when the participant or previous researcher were emotional or were laughing.

Data Analysis Keeping Campbell's monomyth framework in mind, the researcher applied Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to see what kinds of patterns would emerge from the data. The researcher used the three main components of Joseph Campbell's (1949) cycle of the hero's journey to create data codes. The researcher went through the transcript of Jack's interview and coded information as indicative of Separation, Initiation, or Return. The current researcher then further differentiated codes within each of these three categories according to the twelve sub-sections of the hero's journey outlined by Vogler (1992).

After coding the transcript, the current researcher compiled all of the codes into one document and sorted them according to their type. Next, the current researcher created a visual distribution of the data so that each code could be connected to a part of the cycle of the hero's journey. The researcher further differentiated the codes relative to when they occurred within the participant's lifetime, such that multiple cycles of separation, initiation, and return could be identified. The researcher then compiled all of this information and created an organized report, included in the results section of this paper.

Study Limitations One limitation of the present study was that the researcher used a previously conducted interview rather than constructing a new interview that would attempt to directly answer the researcher's research question. An additional limitation was that the current researcher could not contact the participant to clarify any statements made in the interview that might more closely align with the current researcher's inferences if prompted in a different manner. Finally, there is a possibility that the views espoused by the participant in the interview have changed in the time since the interview. However, this possibility does not necessarily

invalidate the data, as it represents a snapshot of the participant's thinking and is therefore still viable for study.

Results

Preliminary findings showed that the subject's interview contained multiple codes marked for separation, initiation, and return. Codes for initiation were the most frequent, followed by codes for separation and then finally codes for return. Once all of the codes were marked and documented, the researcher was able to place them along the subject's narrative timeline. This process yielded four distinct cycles of separation, initiation, and return, implying that the subject experienced four different cycles of the hero's journey.

Journey 1: Early School History

In his interview, Jack reveals that he was diagnosed with a learning disability as early as first grade, but none of his educational stakeholders at school ever explained his disability to him before making decisions that ostracized him from his classmates. He says:

Growing up was kind of hard for me, I was...diagnosed with a learning disability really young and it wasn't really accepted by the family and teachers that I went to school with so...when I would walk into class they would send me off to like, you know, a CMC or a math class or something like that like where I can get like extra help and stuff (2).

Not only was Jack simply shuffled to a different classroom every time he came into school, his disability was not addressed by his parents. Jack noted that, rather than work with teachers and administrators to ensure he received all of the accommodations he needed, Jack's parents instead encouraged him to work at the family business. This pattern alienated Jack from his classmates and also caused him to fall further behind. After failing the first grade, Jack went in and out of

school before eventually gaining enough credits to graduate high school. After Jack graduated, he realized that he wanted to make something of himself, and so he decided to join the military.

If failing the first grade represented Jack's ordinary world, then his withdrawal from consistent schooling was his first initiation into the hardships his life would bring. Throughout this initiation, he experienced trials like his parents' divorce, run-ins with authority, and having to help provide for his younger siblings; all of these conflicts functioned as Jack's trials and temptations. While Jack does not mention anyone specifically who helped him navigate the school system, it can be inferred that there were some allies along the way (teachers, administrators, bus drivers, family friends) who helped Jack persist in his educational journey. All of these trials eventually led Jack to his apotheosis of graduation, whereafter he returned to his ordinary world of working life as a teenager and realized that, in order to change his outlook on life, he would need to apply the knowledge and skills he gained in school to a career in the military.

Journey 2: Military Career

Jack references his decision to join the military as something that was very positive for the trajectory of his life. He notes that before he enlisted, he was in danger of falling back into old habits. "I got in trouble, [and] because of that I needed some money, so I decided that the best way for me to, you know, do good is to get out, so that's when I joined the military" (4). Before enlisting, Jack had also married his high school sweetheart, creating a support system back home. Leaving the ordinary world of his hometown and old problems, Jack was initiated into the armed forces, where he faced trials in the form of combat situations and being apart from his family. He also made allies out of his commanding officers and fellow soldiers. Jack demonstrated growth by earning promotions and awards during his four years in the military, but

perhaps his most marked improvement was in his self-efficacy. Jack remarked of his time on active duty, “I knew I could do it, just through that experience that, you know, I could do anything” (5). After watching his young daughter grow older, though, Jack decided it was time to be discharged so that he could take all of the things he had learned in the armed forces and bring them back to help his family.

Journey 3: Entering University

Just as Jack’s second journey began where his first ended, his third journey began right after he came back from war. As a civilian, Jack did not pursue his dream of helping students who had experiences like his right away; rather, he started working at a factory to support his family. While this factory job paid the bills, it resembled the dead-end job he worked in high school that helped him survive but did not help him thrive. From this new ordinary world, Jack received a call via his wife and friends to pursue higher education. He recalls, “So they said ‘you should look into it, you know, try to go to school.’ So I took one summer class, a speech class at [a junior college] and then my wife--she’s the one who got me in. She was, she, she helped me out there, she got me through the door” (6). Accepting this call, Jack began taking a speech class at a local junior college. From here, he was able to leverage new experiences in the class and his prior skills from the military to earn a very high GPA. And with this GPA, Jack set his eyes on a local four-year university that he admired. After sending in his application, Jack and his wife got the news together that he would be achieving a lifelong dream and attending this four-year university to pursue a degree in education. In this way, Jack became initiated into the world of higher education and would now be returning to his ordinary world at home as a full time student.

Journey 4: Teacher Education

After accepting the call to the university, Jack began studying there and immediately realized that he was at a disadvantage. The course load of an undergraduate degree was beginning to take a toll on him, and because of his learning disability Jack was even further behind. Jack states:

I was drowning. And [my professor]--I, I told her...The first couple of classes she said that she had worked with students with intellectual disabilities and I never said anything to the university about [my learning disability] 'cause I didn't know if I would get in trouble or if it would hurt me being a teacher or anything. So after one day of class I just kind of opened up to her a little bit and told her, you know, 'hey I have a hard time with this stuff' and she just kind of... walked my hand over there [to the academic resource center] (17-18).

With Jack's professor acting as a divinely appointed ally, Jack was able to gain new skills and resources so that he could be successful in his teacher preparation courses. In addition to this help, Jack was able to create new relationships with football coaches from around the city to realize his own dream of becoming a football coach.

This final journey is the cycle that Jack has yet to finish. Jack will return to the ordinary world when he graduates with his degree and becomes a credentialed teacher in a new school. At this point, Jack will come back to that first place of conflict where he was stuck with no hope of a future and no visible path out of his frustration. However, this time he will be equipped with all of the skills, knowledge, and experiences required to combat and overcome the same obstacles that used to hold him back; and Jack will be able to bestow these gifts upon his own students,

equipping future generations to persevere through their own trials on their own journeys towards their own ultimate goals.

Discussion

The present study is a qualitative study. As such, the results do not demonstrate a trend in as much as they describe in detail a certain phenomenon, namely the perpetual hero's journey that the subject Jack has been walking in his pursuit of a meaningful life. However, the implication of Jack's multiple journey model is that many preservice educators, and indeed many other professionals, are engaged in their own journeys which will inevitably have ends in another journey's beginning. And while Jack's experiences and journeys are unique to him, the cast of characters he was surrounded by each had their own path to forge as well. Indeed, there are a variety of characters in our world today with a variety of paths to explore and adventures upon which to embark.

This perspective is particularly useful for educators. In order for educators to identify with the students in their classrooms, they must first understand how and why they journeyed from the pupil's desk to the front of the classroom. Engaging in this self-reflection helps the teacher develop empathy for his or her students and encourages the teacher to think about where all of his or her students are on their own journeys. And while empathy might not be a traditional superpower, it is certainly a weapon capable of disarming the strongest of opponents and turning them into allies instead. Capes, after all, are only costumes; the humility, empathy, and grit developed by a journey of continuous growth are the real superpowers, capable of transforming our world here and now.

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