

Review of *How did you get here? Students with Disabilities and their Journey to Harvard*

Jennifer Joy

University of Nebraska at Kearney

This article reviews *How did you get here? Students with disabilities and their journeys to Harvard*, written by Thomas Herir and Laura A. Schifter. The authors explain the collegiate success stories of several students with varied disabilities and extrapolate themes from interviews with the students and people close to each of them. The book includes many detailed examples and thoughtful questions lead the analysis throughout. Overall, I highly recommend this book as the stories can be an inspiration to any student. Additionally, this book would be a fantastic addition to a course for new professionals in schools or for parents of a child with a disability. Publisher: Harvard Education Press (Boston, MA, 2015). ISBN: 9781612507811. List price: \$35.00 (U.S.). 252 pages.

How did you get here? Students with disabilities and their journeys to Harvard by Thomas Herir and Laura A. Schifter details the stories of sixteen students with disabilities who have attended Harvard. Three students are deaf, three students are blind, one student is both deaf and blind, two students have cerebral palsy, one student has muscular dystrophy, five students have dyslexia, and one student has anxiety and learning disabilities. The chapters are broken into themes the authors discovered through the interview process with each student.

As both an educator and an advocate for children, I was drawn to this book because I am always interested in factors that instill resilience in children. Specifically, what was it about the students in this book that allowed them to beat the odds and continue to prevail when barriers came their way? Previous research has shown various dimensions of resilience, including hope and perseverance (Watson & Vogel, 2017), as well as self-belief in achievement, social skills, and a sense of belonging at school (Yilmaz Findik, 2016). I was very interested to see if these researchers found similar themes emerge or if additional information became evident that could positively impact the trajectory of more students in the future.

The theme of chapter one is the positive influence of parents who advocated for several of the students. One mother challenged the outcomes of her child's disability and the goals the district wanted her child to pursue. Additionally, parents taught their children to advocate for themselves and allowed their independence when appropriate. "Jennifer's parents fought for her when she needed it and gave her the skills to fight for herself" (p. 20). Authors detailed how parents taught children not to be ashamed of their disabilities by teaching them to speak up for what they need. "They (parents) always made sure I was in a situation where people appreciated both my strengths and weaknesses and where I was never made to feel stupid" (p.22). Additionally, many parents went above

and beyond to advocate for cultural understanding around their child's disability. For example, "All three deaf students reported close and sustaining relationships with the deaf community" (p. 26). The authors report that many of the students "credit their parents with advocating for them and giving them a positive identity as a person with a disability" (p. 28).

Chapter two highlights the people who have paved the way for each student's success. Supporters included teachers, speech therapists, early interventionists, physical therapists, and caseworkers. The authors found many students mentioned the teaching styles of the teachers being a key factor in their success, using words such as "fun and exciting" (p. 66) and "clear and explicit" (p.66). The authors make a wonderful statement that "any teacher can make the choice to believe in his or her students and let them know it" (p. 69). This support was clearly a theme across the stories presented by this group of students.

Chapter three demonstrates that the students in this group were intellectually driven. They asked to be challenged. They didn't allow people to set low expectations for them. Some of the students seemed to be inherently motivated and driven toward academic success, and others seemed to be inspired by the aforementioned groups (parents, teachers, etc.) who modeled this drive. A very critical question is asked by the authors: "How many students with disabilities have gone through school with their intellectual gifts ignored" (p. 87)? Additionally, in the chapter the authors initiate the discussion related to inclusion and what settings allow students to be most successful. This conversation is discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

Extracurricular activities are the topic of chapter four. The stories of the successful students included participation in multiple extracurricular activities including various sports and music. These activities allowed the students to develop friendships and become part of the community when fostered by various professionals.

Chapter five highlights the ways students advocated for their needs and developed strategies to maximize their strengths and minimize any barriers brought their way by their disabilities. Chapter six demonstrates the significant role technology has played in the success of this group of students.

Chapter seven is a detailed account of the experiences of one of the authors, Laura Schifter. The other author, Tomas Hehir, then accounts the changes he has made to his teaching as a result of what he learned through the process of interviewing each of these students. He states that “at various times in their educational careers, the students had to bear the ‘burden’ of disability more heavily than the schools” (p.181). Additionally, he discusses changes to his thoughts on universal design for learning, inclusion, ableism, and special education. He also emphasizes the importance of early intervention in paving the way toward academic success. Finally, Tomas Hehir explained some of the issues related to policy. “Hehir was responsible for federal leadership in implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and played a leading role in developing the Clinton administration’s proposal for the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA” (p. 237). He mentions the importance of civil rights protection for students with disabilities on their road to success and the need to increase attention toward laws regarding technology and accommodations, along with other policy issues and recommendations.

Finally, the last chapter is a conclusion written by Wendy S. Harbour, the Lawrence B. Taishoff Professor of Inclusive Education at Syracuse University. She describes her story and discusses the programming she provides for students. In this chapter, she delves into the topic of transition planning and addresses some of the questions brought forth from parents of students with disabilities preparing for college, specifically, “Can students with *any* disability go to college” (p. 214)? In this chapter, some strategies are discussed for allowing access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. One solution mentioned is expanding and changing our views on intellectualism.

In the final chapter, Wendy Harbour states, “Many of these students struggled with whether or not to ‘stay in the closet’” (p. 223) regarding disclosing their disability and the needs associated with it. This was a statement brought to light in many of the chapters in the book. It is unfortunate that this is still a common concern for students with disabilities. On that note, one thing I would have liked to see is broader range of disabilities represented. In the beginning of chapter four, the authors describe a recollection of one of the students saying, “Since he could not succeed at anything in school, he decided he would succeed at being a ‘badass’” (p.91). I worked with many students who displayed emotional disabilities, autism spectrum

disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and various behavioral difficulties as a part of their disability, as part of a mental health issue, or as a means to avoid tasks that were difficult as a product of their disability. There were few references to behavioral or emotional struggles in the book. The issues related to the success of these populations may be quite different from the majority of the students represented in the book. In my experience, this is a group of students who still feel quite stigmatized and often choose not to receive the support they may need to be successful rather than declaring that they have an emotional need.

That being said, I did appreciate the portion of the Conclusion that addresses transition. While the stories were not directly compared to see if the outcomes for students with more “visible” disabilities, such as blindness, differed from students with less “visible” disabilities, such as dyslexia, in this chapter the authors do advocate for better outreach to the general student population. Specifically, students should be asked the following questions during college orientations according to the authors: *What are disability, medical, and counseling resources, and who can use them? Can disability services help people who don’t think of themselves as disabled? Are people with disabilities welcome as part of the campus diversity? Are there courses about disability, student groups, or other ways to connect to disabled students and allies on campus? What does the campus mean by the term “disability,” and could my “difference” actually be a “disability”? If I have a disability, isn’t that a bad thing?* (p.219) This would allow the discussion to be open, and students with less visible disabilities may be able to better advocate for their own needs.

As a professional working with students with a whole variety of disabilities and needs, I always considered my most important role as being the advocate for the needs of each student and their welfare, including everything from basic safety to attaining their individual potential. Thus, I was quite eager to read this book. I was not disappointed. Since I worked for several years as a school psychologist, the information presented was not new to me, but it is a wonderful depiction of success that would be a fantastic addition to a course for new professionals in schools of any level, for parents of students with or without disabilities, and for students with or without disabilities. In fact, as I was reading, I kept thinking how these guidelines for success extend beyond students with disabilities attending Harvard. Having a strong support system, learning strategies for one’s own success and advocating for oneself, and not allowing others to minimize one’s dreams or to lower their expectations are just some of the themes that would help any person be successful.

The authors do express that this is an account of a small group of students, and I don’t believe they tried to

overgeneralize toward a larger population. Still, more students and more stories may bring to light further themes to help others hoping to be successful in higher education. While the sample size in the book was rather small, many of the themes were consistent with the many students I worked with over the years. For example, while reading the chapter on extracurricular activities, I recall our team taking one seventh-grade boy who was consistently driving his teachers crazy by tapping on his desk in class and placing him in the band on the drums. His math teacher who had him the class after band came to me one day and said, "I never have any problems with him in class." I also remembered several students with autism benefiting from being included in gym class and playing basketball, swimming, and socializing with the other students through sports, which leveled the playing field in cases where students had limited abilities to verbally communicate with peers. The authors of the book discussed how school personnel are often quick to take away extracurricular activities, which I also saw far too regularly. I always tried to advocate for other solutions, and I hope more people in schools are doing the same.

Since the students were included because of being in special education, I was surprised that the authors used medical diagnoses rather than educational disability labels to describe the students. One example is dyslexia, which is a medical umbrella term and encompasses a variety of issues and needs, instead of the area of need under the category of a specific learning disability. According to the International Dyslexia Association (2002), dyslexia is "characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities." Thus, in Colorado, the education disability label would most likely be either a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) basic reading skill or SLD reading fluency or both, and possibly other areas as a result, such as written expression or math application.

Finally, one additional theme that was evident through reading the stories of these students, and in

combination with the numerous students with whom I worked, is that we need to keep our focus on the "I" in IEP. The Individualized Education Program should be made to support each student to their own potential. In the book, the authors discuss inclusive education and how some students really benefitted from separate programs or even separate schools, while at other times students benefitted from opportunities in mainstream education (some even eliminating their special education status). In the schools, sometimes students have to choose between having certain accommodations and participating in other programs which may be just as influential in their success. These are the kinds of problems that cause barriers to some school systems. We, as professionals in the schools, need to find more ways to be flexible to enhance success for more students.

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JENNIFER JOY is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling and School Psychology Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. She completed her doctoral degree in School Psychology with a minor in Statistics and Research Methods, and she then spent several years in the schools working as a school psychologist before teaching. In the schools, she served various special populations and special programs for students ranging in age from 2 to 21. Her research is focused on social competence, school readiness, play, mindfulness, and early literacy.