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*A Personal Account of Being the Fat Teacher*

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A Personal Account of Being the Fat Teacher

Olivia Di Giammarino

**Abstract**: A personal narrative on the experiences of being ‘the fat teacher’. This paper details the physical and emotional challenges faced and the liminal space between fat-shame and fat-acceptance. Acknowledging the body as a location for learning, this paper describes the author’s unique and individual experience when thanked for being fat by a parent of a fat child. Written in illustrative prose this paper explores the entanglement of identity, oppression and acceptance.

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A parent approaches me during curriculum night, she says “My daughter is so happy you are her teacher and I am so glad you’re fat. You’re a great role model". My face flushes with embarrassment. Did this parent just call me fat? Do my students think I'm fat? I am confused and continue to smile my way through the night. I cry on the drive home. It was hard for me to reckon with the power behind the statement this parent made. Afterall, she was glad that her daughter had a fat role model, but that is not who I wanted to be. I wanted to be a sixth-grade teacher; did I have to have a body while doing it? It was then that I realized my body was a location, a text unto itself. No matter what I told myself about my body, it could be seen and interpreted by others and perhaps most interestingly, by twelve-year-old girls.

I was hired to teach at an all-girls Catholic private school. I spent the summer dreaming of lesson plans and decorating my classroom. I had never once considered the silent narrative that my three hundred and fifty-plus pound body would tell, nor did I consent to my body telling it. I was so accustomed to my body poorly representing me that I did whatever I could to transcend the body I hated so much. Years of overcompensating for a body my mind had long divorced, I had so much more to offer than being the fat teacher. What I did not realize at curriculum night was that embracing the role of the fat teacher and leaning into my fatness as a place of learning could possibly be the most significant lesson I ever learn.

Every Tuesday the Middle School teachers would gather in a classroom for a department meeting called a Professional Learning Community. We would discuss the upcoming week, students of concern and general administrative items. Since we held the meeting in a classroom, my colleagues would turn desks around to face each other. I attend my first meeting and watch my colleagues effortlessly fit into a desk with an attached chair designed for middle school children. I do not “fit”. I look for a single chair and take a seat, on the fringe of my cohort. I am tormented with shame and embarrassment. I push myself to exude confidence, to be unapologetic for the space that I take up. Inside I am wilting.

None of my colleagues say anything, perhaps sparing me from further embarrassment. No one offers to make the meeting more accessible and being new to the faculty, I am ill equipped to advocate for myself. Despite the obvious inaccessibility, no one seems to care. I cannot help but wonder if my colleagues are embarrassed for me, if I am pitied or tolerated. Would I have fit into these desks at twelve years old? I reflect on my own young body in the throes of puberty, tender and vulnerable, being asked to obey the standards of a desk. As a child I never thought of myself as obese, although based on medical standards I definitely was. However, I did know my body was bigger than most of my peers from a very early age and therefore less than. I internalized my fatness as a flaw and something that needed correcting. Each Tuesday slowly nudges me from embarrassment to anger and I am fixated on the transmission of self-hatred by way of desk.

I hold a tension. I have a desire to advocate for fatness and accessibility but I continue to gain weight, my self-esteem plummets and I grow a sense of self-loathing. It is exhausting for me to take the single flight of stairs to reach my classroom. I am removed from supervision duties that include light to moderate exercise like walking around the campus. Administrators ignore my request for larger faculty clothing. No one talks to me about it, but I notice and so do my students, that I have been quietly exiled. I am officially scared that my body will slowly isolate me and I will lose myself to fatness. Does being the fat teacher mean accepting not only the indifference as already shown by my colleagues, but the reality that the community I work alongside and serve might learn to hate my fat body too?

A student taps me on the shoulder, her eyes are swollen and drowning with tears. She asks to speak with me privately. She says, “my father thinks I need to lose weight because I’m fat”. She sobs violently. I apologize to my student, recognizing that this comment hurt her feelings. *This is the daughter of the parent from curriculum night.* I thank my student for telling me and console her. There we stand, both terrified of our fatness. The lunch bell rings.

When my student revealed to me the wound of being called “fat” by someone she loved, I identified the woundedness of myself. Accepting hatred is perhaps the first part of hating yourself less. I had no agency to change my body as an obese child and the illusion of that agency birthed feelings of betrayal. In recognizing and legitimizing my student’s pain, I finally recognized and legitimized my own. The low tide of oppression creeps into the daily conversations I have with my body. How can accommodating me be so challenging? Why is my fatness so undeserving? I am not disgusting. I am worthy. My fatness is worthy.

Mollow (2015) succinctly describes, “the modes by which fat people are oppressed are indistinguishable from ableism: architectural barriers, discrimination, pathologization, pity, and staring are common social responses to both fatness and disability” (Mollow 200). As I learn to reframe the heartache of my own fatness, I am also called to reframe how I am approaching teaching my disabled students. I begin to politely question the methods and procedures with which our school accommodates and modifies curriculum expectations. Starting with my own class, I begin reading and researching more equitable practices for my students with Dyslexia, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Executive Functioning Learning Disability. After extensive research and thoughtful conversation, I recommend several students for psycho-educational assessments. They all come back with diagnosed learning disabilities.

At this time the school, which requires an entrance exam prior to acceptance, does not have a Special Education Department. I slowly started suggesting more robust systems of support; ones that a student could easily access at a publicly funded school such as a scribe for tests, peer note taking, leveled reading assessments. To prove my point, I completed a reading assessment on my entire sixth grade class and I let my administrator know that a handful of students are several deviations behind in reading and they need reading intervention. I am allowed to begin individualized programming for these students and outline the support they are receiving by other teachers as well. I care less about what my colleagues think of me and begin focusing on making this about equity and inclusion for my students. They may physically fit into their desks, but the issues of access and inclusion are ours to share.

My administrator pulls me aside and hands me a stack of student transcripts. These students have identified learning disabilities and need more specific programming. She tasks me with reading through their assessment documents and that is how it happens, I find my vocation. I read hundreds of pages of psychoeducational assessments to understand these students are academically misrepresented because of their learning disabilities, circumstances, high social-emotional needs, or complex medical histories. Their academic potential calculated, graphed, and given a prescription for treatment was not unlike my fat body; also calculated, graphed, and given a prescription. It was then in meetings with my colleagues who seemed so unphased by the concept of access and inclusion that I finally found the combination of anger and compassion to become an unapologetic advocate for children.

The following school year I took the position as the sole Resource Teacher, serving students grades five through twelve. I was in a one-woman department. While this position previously existed it remained vacant for several years. After two months combing through student records, I discovered fifty-four students who are identified with a learning disability or exceptionality. I was leading my first staff meeting to review students with higher needs when I began with “Kennedy’s” profile. I was shaking. Some teachers, knowing “Kennedy’s” story, questioned her enrollment, they did not want her in their classes and were relatively vocal about it. “Kennedy” has dyslexia. She was diagnosed with dyslexia the summer prior to eleventh grade, which is considerably late. Her previous school saw no indication of a learning disability that impacted reading and so “Kennedy'' was placed in a non-academic stream. Teachers focused on her athletic ability, her height and talent for team sports and leadership. She was removed from university preparatory classes. I breathe deeply and say with an immovable force “this student belongs here and as a school we need more “Kennedys”. We need more students with learning disabilities who deserve the opportunity of a robust education with the support they deserve”. That was the last time I was nervous in front of my colleagues.

I learned in my first year of leading a department that some people will never understand exclusion and the desire to fit in. I learned that it is so much better to be disliked for criticizing and questioning the inequitable practices of colleagues than to watch children suffer through their education. I learned that I can heal from the humiliation of not fitting into a desk. I learned that my ability to be a passionate educator and advocate has nothing and everything to do with being the fat teacher.

References

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