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**“Your Body is for You”: Possibilities for Size Acceptance,
Criticality, and Social-Emotional Wellness in Upper Elementary
English Language Arts Education**

Veronica B. Walton

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**“Your Body is for You”: Possibilities for Size Acceptance, Criticality, and
Social-Emotional Wellness in Upper Elementary English Language Arts Education**

&

Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid, an Original Picture Book

by

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Teaching Literacy and Childhood General Education

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Abstract

This Integrated Master's Project explores how body image literature can be used in upper elementary classrooms (grades 3 to 5) to support critical literacy and psychosocial development, and vice-versa. Using the approaches Health at Every Size® (HAES), affect theory, and critical literacy, I propose a new analytical framework for thinking about weight stigma and children's self-image through the lens of literature. There is a growing presence of fiction and nonfiction books that address weight stigma and center children's experiences of their bodies, and incorporating these books into literacy/English Language Arts (ELA) curricula can help educators shape their classrooms into spaces of care and critical consciousness. At the heart of my project is *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*: an original picture book about a nine-year-old girl who learns with the help of her family to accept her body as it is, even when the process proves to be difficult. In a society where children are continuously exposed to "the thin ideal," literature provides a powerful counter-narrative and an opportunity for educators to raise awareness of weight discrimination and promote self-acceptance.

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“What does it say about our culture that the desire for weight loss is considered a default feature of womanhood?”

— Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*

“I’m not going to
try to hide myself
or make myself small anymore.
How I’m proud to be me
and claim my right
to take up space.
I deserve to be seen.
To be noticed.
To be heard.
To be treated like a human.”

— Lisa Fipps, *Starfish*

The Weight of Consciousness

I started worrying about my weight when I was in the third grade. My doctor told my parents that I was chubby for my age, but that this was “normal” and something I would grow out of. Despite his reassurances, I slowly began to view myself as inherently different from other girls: unattractive, unfeminine, and unworthy. An eager ballet dancer, I would examine my stomach, arms, and thighs in the mirror during class, comparing myself to the skinnier girls around me. I would tirelessly prod at my mosquito bite breasts, which people kept telling me were “on the larger side,” wishing they would disappear – or, alternatively, get bigger, so that at least I could be considered beautiful. I asked my mother if it was normal that I was always looking at myself in the mirror, and if she thought that I should go on a diet. After all, my parents were also suffering under diet culture.

Come middle and high school, however, I was generally satisfied with my weight. My insecurities instead were my acne, facial structure, abilities, and personality. Although I was not concerned about my body size specifically, I was preoccupied with the same all-consuming feelings of self-disgust and anxiety around how others perceived me. Still, like other teenagers I knew, I engaged in fatphobic talk (e.g., gossiping about others’ weight, telling friends how pretty they were “despite” their size), occasional dieting behaviors, and emotional eating. It was not until my freshman year of college when, after gaining a significant amount of weight over the course of one summer, that I began to experience intense body dysmorphia and dissatisfaction. My weight was the reason all of the boys I had had crushes on did not like me back. My weight was the reason I had a hard time keeping friends. My weight was the reason clothes didn’t look good on me, that I felt ostracized and isolated, that I felt sad and angry and anxious. All of the fatphobia I had been marinating in throughout my life I now directed inward.

My disordered eating behaviors began when I was twenty. At the time, I was studying abroad in Ireland. Deprived of my usual structure around mealtimes – since now I had to cook for myself instead of simply visiting a dining hall – it was easier for me to restrict my food intake if I so desired. For several months, I ate around 800 calories a day, which is about what the average infant needs. I also engaged in excessive exercise and obsessive-compulsive behaviors around mealtimes, food groups, and nutrition labels. My hair fell out, my wrists and hipbones ached, and I completely lost my menstrual period for almost a year.

My anxiety outside of food worsened, too; many of my relationships were put under duress, and I threw myself into my schoolwork to distract from my sadness and pain. But in many ways my outward social image improved. I received countless compliments about how much “better” I looked, how I was obviously healthier now, how I was “prettier” after having lost weight. These were all real things people said to me while I was starving myself. Hence, I knew that if I ventured outside of my rigid, restrictive routines, my identity would completely disintegrate. For who was I if not an object for men to sexualize, to control? Who was I if not my size, my discipline? And so over the course of about three years, I built a life around being and feeling small.

But things eventually changed. In my eating disorder’s place, something new – something unsettling and exciting and altogether terrifying – crystallized. They were the ideas of intuitive eating and body neutrality. My journey in eating disorder recovery mirrors that of many young women: I went to therapy and started the process of physical and cognitive restructuring. After “overeating” for a while with the intention of getting my period back, I learned to listen to my hunger and fullness cues. I temporarily stopped exercising because I knew that my relationship with it was disordered, and instead reflected on the healthful, non-weight-centric

purposes of exercise. Of course, however, I did not get help until I was underweight, until people were genuinely worried about me because I was “too thin.” And even at my lowest weight, I was told that I didn't *really* have anorexia because I was not thin *enough*. But in my heart, I know that is what I was experiencing: anorexia is torture. I lost out on friends, experiences, and joy. I lost all sense of who I was.

My experiences with an eating disorder and fatphobia are not unique. Our culture primes all of us, especially girls, for eating disorders. In a way, I was always-already anorexic, and even those who do not go on to develop eating disorders still all too often engage in diet culture and fatphobic talk. Social media, movies and TV, books, peers, parents, and some doctors have been brainwashed by fatphobia: the hatred of fat bodies and fatness. No matter their size or intersecting identities, almost all girls and women have felt ashamed of their bodies and feared weight gain. This fear and shame are complicated by sociocultural factors such as race and disability. I, for instance, am still learning about the intersections between my eating disorder and my neurodevelopmental differences: my ADHD, generalized anxiety disorder, and sensory issues.

I write this thesis while living in a thin body. Even at my heaviest, I was straight-sized / mid-sized. I am also a white, cisgender, heterosexual, and neurodivergent woman; these identities all shape who I am as a writer, reader, and academic. This thesis, along with *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, are written from the perspective of a main character (and graduate student author) who have experienced what it is like to not conform to narrow societal beauty standards, to suffer from disordered eating thoughts and behaviors, but not of living in a *truly* fat body. Hence, this is a disclaimer that I discuss fatphobia – and body image affects around fatness – without having ever lived in a fat body myself.

I write this thesis with the knowledge that not everyone who encounters *Phoebe* will “get it.” With the knowledge that there are countless people, regardless of size, who are not ready for conversations about fatphobia, about how all body types can be healthy and beautiful, about how diet culture is killing us, about how sizeism is one of the last acceptable forms of discrimination. With the knowledge that teachers, parents, and administrators may never want *Phoebe* to be used as a text in schools because they will feel, falsely, that it promotes obesity. And still I write it. Still, I present scientific, political, and cultural evidence as to why these conversations are vital to social justice and social-emotional learning in schools, because there are so many Phoebes out there, and because I was Phoebe myself. We must not shy away from difficult, nuanced conversations with children about body size, just as we should not from conversations around race and gender.

I write this thesis because children deserve better.

A Working Definition of Body Image

Body image is not only a lens, as it is commonly thought of, but a collection of actions; it describes the ways in which we move through space, through our communities, through discourse and feeling. Meland, Haugland, and Breidablik (2007) define body image as “the individual, subjective sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body or physical appearance,” which is similar to the definition provided by the National Eating Disorders Collaboration: “a combination of thoughts and feelings that you have about your body” (NEDC). The problem with these definitions is that they do not address the internalization of, for instance, cultural ideals. Introducing a biopsychosocial dimension, Roosen and Mills (2014) paraphrase Cash and Smolak (2011):

“Body image” can be loosely defined as the *mental representation* of our bodies that we hold in our minds. Originally, it was believed that body image is a mirror image of what objectively exists in the world, but that certain pathologies could interfere with this *perceptual process* (e.g., phantom limb pain or anorexia nervosa). However, more recent literature suggests that body image is *strongly influenced by a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, psychological, social, cultural, biological, historical, and individual factors.* (emphasis added)

Similarly, Quittkat et al. (2019) writes that

[body image] is a multidimensional construct, which encompasses a *behavioral component* involving body-related behaviors (e.g. checking behaviors), a *perceptual component* involving the perception of body characteristics (e.g. estimation of one's body size or weight), and a *cognitive-affective* component involving cognitions, attitudes, and feelings toward one's body. (emphasis added)

For the purposes of this project, I conceive of body image as a dynamic, multidimensional set of lenses, processes, and actions related to one's own body, bodies in general, and cultural notions of beauty, health, and socioeconomic worth. I also specifically focus on weight as an aspect of body image as opposed to other aspects such as skin color,

gender presentation, or hair. Body image is indeed tied up with one's interiority, and is at the same time inevitably involved with and influenced by relationships with other people and the media. In later sections of this paper, I will elaborate on how the “perceptual ... and cognitive-affective components” of body image shape the narration of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* (Quitkat et al., 2019), particularly in girls and women, and through the lenses of affect theory, critical literacy, and Health at Every Size® (HAES). A process of perception such as body image is not limited to “satisfaction or dissatisfaction” (Meland et al., 2007) with the self and in turn others. Analyzing the construction of body image allows us to better understand how power and ideology subjugate girls and women: unconsciously and without our consent.

Institutionalized Fatphobia

Stigma against people of a larger size is contained in institutions. Societal subjects run institutions in a mutually reinforcing loop. The media and beauty industry, for example, instigate social surveillance around aesthetics, wealth, and power – though not monolithically – and schools and the medical field have the power to reinforce such ideas. In this section, I put forth the “tangled roots,” as Kristen Hardy writes, of cultural fatphobia (Hardy, 2021): its co-emergence and status as a tool of neoliberalism, racism, and patriarchy, and its co-opting as a marker of worth, fitness, and social capital. I hope to rationalize the need for a book such as *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*: a nostrum, an offering, a window onto a better world for our children marinating in an oppressive and all-encompassing culture of body hatred.

The Origins and Maintenance of Weightism

In this section I will trace the trajectory of anti-fat bias as the rationale for writing *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*. According to the Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH),

anti-fat bias, or fatphobia, is “the stigmatizing belief that bodies should be thin and/or muscular to fit within commonly held standards of beauty, fitness, and health” (ASDAH). Fatphobia has been called one of the last socially acceptable forms of discrimination (Vartanian et al., 2014, pp. 196; Emmer et al., 2019, pp. 1). The media: social networking sites, advertisements, literature, television, and films are a breeding ground for fatphobic ideas, even with a growing number of body-positive social media creators working to “alleviate” weightism (Clark et al., 2021). TV and films such as *The Whale* (2022) (which stars Oscar-winning Brendan Fraser in a fat suit) and *Pitch Perfect* (2012) often portray fat¹ characters as tragic, out-of-control, gluttonous, and/or “suffering” (Syed, 2022). In their study of 135 scenes from films and television shows, Susan M. Himes and J. Kevin Thompson found that “fat stigmatization commentary and fat humor (is) often verbal, directed toward another person, and ... presented directly in the presence of the overweight target;” in other words, fatphobia in media is highly visible, both “reflecting the social consensus of the culture” and “contributing to the shaping of norms and beliefs about weight” (Himes & Thompson, 2012).

Fatphobia is frequently framed solely as a health concern and contained in “blatant ... demeaning remarks (that) are often justified as being ‘for (fat people’s) own good’” (Major et al., 2013, pp. 2). The medical field is divided on this issue, as there is evidence that fatness is correlated with health concerns such as high blood pressure and restricted mobility (Penn Medicine, 2017). However research also suggests that stigma is an important factor that shapes fat people’s health and ability to thrive, and that perhaps these factors that we at one time viewed as causal are more complicated than we once thought (Penn Medicine, 2017; Anekwe, 2022). Hence it is unjust to view body size as the sole determinant of health; instead, we should

¹ I use the word “fat” throughout this thesis as a neutral descriptor. Many in the fat acceptance movement, such as author and activist Aubrey Gordon, have stated their preference for the term “fat” over terms such as “chunky,” “curvy,” or “obese,” which they deem stigmatizing.

lead with thinking about the health of the whole person, about the whole of their humanity. Given how the media so frequently associates weight, health, beauty, and worthiness, the way we “care” for others of a higher body weight is often tainted by weight bias, leading to “negative emotional consequences, including depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and, in some individuals, increased risk for suicidal ideation” (Skinner et al., 2017). This begs the question: does someone need to be small or what we think of as “healthy” to deserve respect and access to lifesaving care?

Alternatively, the dieting industry has conceptualized fatness as both immoral and an individual responsibility (Kwan, 2009, pp. 27; Diaz, 2018, pp. 4), and dieting as a solution to moral, health, and aesthetic ills. In reality, an individual’s weight can be traced to genetics, metabolic profile, mental health, and environmental factors (Kwan, 2009, pp. 38; Anekwe, 2022). Dieting is presented as a “quick fix” so that one’s body can fit in better with cultural beauty standards and popular conceptions of health. Dieting thus exists as a form of social control, surveillance, and subjugation. Long-term dieting can cause health problems such as disordered eating, weight cycling, nutrient deficiencies, loss of bone density, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, depression, and anxiety (Montgomery, 2021; Guerdjikova, 2021; Tylka et al., 2014). In “The Weight of Consciousness,” my personal experiences with an eating disorder reveal the ills of dieting.

Scaffolded by the dieting industry, weightism has become a key ideology of neoliberal capitalism. In American society, the body is a “practical, direct locus of social control” (Bordo, 2003, pp. 165): “a site of cultural production of identity,” and therefore socioeconomic subjectivity (Diaz 2018, p. 4). Felix Diaz, in *Body Image as an Everyday Problematic*, quotes Nikolas Rose (1990) and argues that

for “body image” to consolidate as a discourse, it required the contribution of professional and academic disciplines responding to a cultural concern while providing the public with theories and technologies to deal with it...It required “the language of government” to “make new sectors of reality thinkable and practicable.” (pp. 3)

In “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies,” Julie Guthman argues that the American economy encourages consumerism – both food overconsumption and restriction – creating a never-ending cycle of weight gain, weight loss, and dieting. Specifically, “the body becomes a place where capitalism’s contradictions are temporarily resolved” as individuals pursue “purchasable solutions to the problems that it generates” (Guthman, 2009, pp. 191-2). In other words, the dieting industry creates a problem to be solved, and this “problem” is buttressed and given legitimacy by many health professionals (who have otherwise valid concerns about their patients’ general nutrition, mobility, and activity levels). Under neoliberalism, Guthman maintains, it is profitable to maintain dissatisfaction. It is profitable to redirect individuals’ attention away from weight as a socioeconomic issue towards and instead as one of individual responsibility. We hear of “the obesity epidemic,” but we hear much less about lack of access and care, especially for disenfranchised people living in food deserts, for instance: Guthman writes that “solutions (to fatness) map onto social class, such that the relatively rich buy themselves weight loss while the relatively poor do not” (pp. 191).

The standard that many medical professionals use, one which has seeped into the popular imagination, is the Body Mass Index, or BMI. The BMI was developed in the 1830s by a non-doctor, Adolphe Quetelet, who was a eugenicist (Grue & Heiberg, 2006) and did not intend for his scale to be used for medical purposes; the BMI does not take into account the “health behaviors” or “body composition” that are critical in determining health status (Montgomery, 2021). Many American schools still use the BMI to assess students without consistent evidence of its success in fighting “obesity” (Eating Disorders Coalition et al.; Center for Disease Control

and Prevention). As I will elaborate on in the following section, fatphobia is unfortunately present in many school settings, whether it is embedded directly into curricula or taken as gospel by educators and students themselves (Sykes & McPhail, 2008). Fatphobia and the encouragement of weight loss by some medical professionals – as opposed to the development of sustainable, life-affirming healthy habits – negatively impact children’s mental health by making them more susceptible to anxiety, depression, disordered eating, increased stress, and healthcare avoidance (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Major et al., 2013; Emmer et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2017).

Numerous studies suggest that the negative effects that many doctors associate with being fat, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, are aggravated by weight stigma and pressure to lose weight (Penn Medicine, 2017; Anekwe, 2022), in that fat patients may turn to unhealthy coping strategies such as binge eating in order to “suppress negative cognitions and emotions” (Major et al., 2013, pp. 1). While we have long known that being at a very high weight, especially when related to non-genetic factors such as lifestyle, can lead to health and mobility problems, children hear more than simply our health concerns: that weight gain is to be avoided at all costs, that it is one’s individual responsibility to micromanage their body to the point of obsession, and that fat people – regardless of real or perceived health status – are unworthy of love, care, and acceptance.

There is mounting evidence that weight bias is a significant factor in fat people’s health, not fatness independent of anything else (Anekwe, 2022; Major et al., 2013; Emmer et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2017). Responses to and revisions of traditional weight science include the framework Health at Every Size® (HAES), developed by Dr. Lindo Bacon, which prioritizes healthy behaviors over weight loss. Recent education has also focused on how populations other

than white, cisgender, able-bodied women are affected by fatphobia, as well as how social media proselytizes the thin ideal. Though culture cannot change overnight, the way forward for American schools – towards an eating disorder- and size discrimination-free future – is to promote “weight-inclusive” healthy behaviors (Tylka et al., 2014), positive body image, and critical literacy instead of weight loss and “obesity epidemic” scare tactics.

Even though weight discrimination is experienced most directly by fat people, fatphobia is harmful to everyone and creates a culture of alienation and fear around fatness. This culture of alienation – from ourselves, our needs, and from other people – informed how I wrote *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*. Young girls are almost universally exposed to fatphobia regardless of actual body size but especially those in larger bodies. By the age of six, girls already desire to be thinner and have negative perceptions of fatness (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010, pp. 413; Birbeck & Drummond, 2006, pp. 423). The “mutually reinforcing” dynamic of institutionalized weight stigma I alluded to earlier is contained in media depictions of fat people (and weight loss), bullying around size, the beauty industry, and some medical professionals (Emmer et al., 2019; Vartanian et al., 2013; Nolfi, 2011; Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009; Kost & Jamie, 2022). Phoebe and her real-life counterparts, our female students in larger bodies, bear the weight of weight-based teasing and treatment on a regular basis (Emmer et al., 2019; Vartanian et al., 2013; Weinstock & Kreihbel, 2009); thin girls may fear getting fat, be complicit in teasing because they accept it as the norm, or participate in fatphobic talk (Barron, 2016; Shaw, 2020). Weight-based teasing and fatphobic ideology creates stigma, which then, as evidenced previously, can affect students’ quality of life and overall health.

Inside and outside of school grounds, our female (and nonbinary, socialized as female) students are continually exposed to highly edited photos on social media (e.g., filters), diet

products promising fast results, and casual fatphobia and anxiety around weight in books, TV shows, and movies. Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag argue that social and entertainment media serves “as panopticon ... infused with patriarchal beliefs, and therefore women learn to see and judge themselves through men’s eyes and according to men’s criteria” (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009, pp. 289). Additionally, women, in criticizing other women, contribute to the panopticon of weightism. This is not to say that boys do not also experience weight stigma and fatphobia, but rather that weight stigma is exacerbated by patriarchal beauty standards, and affects girls and women differently from how it affects boys and men (McCleskey, 2022). Indeed, Susan Bordo writes that weight loss and fatphobia are key features of the “reproduction” of feminine subjects:

Women ... are spending more time on the management and discipline of our bodies than we have in a long, long time....Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity ... female bodies become docile bodies....Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress ... we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack ... of never being good enough. At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death. (Bordo, 2003, pp. 166).

Thus it is crucial that our schools, as reinforcers of fatphobic power dynamics, help students to realize a positive body image and reject fatphobia. It is crucial that we design our spaces and curricula with students of all sizes in mind and think critically about the messages we are sending about the relationship between body size and power, body size and worthiness. Do we want our classrooms to become sites of so-called “demoralization,” or do we want students, regardless of the body they live in, to see themselves represented positively in our talk, our literature, and our media, and treated with kindness and respect? Such is the pressing need for a book such as *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, wherein girls in larger bodies can see themselves as a

complex set of affects, dreams, and joys – as colorful “mermaids” on journeys to self-actualization.

Size Discrimination, Children, and Schools

“I visit my watery world in my head, too. Like at school, when I get picked last for kickball because everyone thinks I’m too slow. Or after my crush Jake called me “chubby” behind my back. Or when my teacher cut me the smallest piece of cake during a class birthday party. As if they didn’t think I’d notice. The ocean lives in my mind, always there when I need an escape, when I need a reminder about who I really am.”

– from *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* (2023)

Because schools are contained within our fatphobic society, schools may inadvertently or intentionally encourage weight discrimination. Especially over the past two decades, the epidemicization of “obesity” has given legitimacy to already-ingrained fatphobia among many administrators, educators, students, and curricula. There are both interpersonal and physical considerations. The facet of weight stigma addressed most directly in the book is that of peer relationships and fatphobic, stigmatizing language. As a teacher, the number of times I have heard children use the word “fat” to mean lazy, greedy, disgusting, or evil is disheartening. Juvonen et al. (2017) state that “the mental health problems of youth with heavy weight are related to the ridicule, disrespect, and exclusion they often experience at the hands of their peers” (pp. 150). Damiano et al. (2018) add that “weight stigma ... has been shown to lead to larger children being teased and victimized by peers, resulting in low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and loneliness” (pp. 488).

Research shows that children as young as three-to-five years old internalize ideas about their bodies and those of others, as well as bias against fat people (Damiano et al. 2018, pp. 488; Coyne et al. 2022, pp. 44). As children grow, they “are still developing a self-identity, a stable

body image, and self-esteem, which are crucial for well-being and can be strongly affected by weight stigma” (Emmer et al., 2019), especially if this stigma comes from peers and adults in their lives who may “exhibit explicit bias” or “unintentionally communicate judgment or victimization” (Palad et al., 2019).

In an article for *Rethinking Schools*, Katy Alexander describes her experience:

When I was a fat kid, I was teased by other kids relentlessly. Teachers preached weight loss. I couldn't fit into the attached desks. I couldn't fit into the orchestra uniform, and I had trouble fully participating in PE. Now, as a fat teacher, I can't sit at the table at staff meetings because I don't fit. I can't wear a staff shirt because there isn't one in my size. I can't escape the comments, barbs, and harassment about my fat body from my colleagues and my students. There are always these reminders that I do not belong. (2021)

She goes on to explain the difficulties that seating arrangements (e.g., attached desks), school uniforms, and weight limits on field trips pose(d) for her as a fat student and teacher. Alexander writes that many adult bystanders, such as teachers, are complicit in fatphobic bullying because they “agree with it,” or “don't consider how it impacts” their students (2021; see also: Weinstock & Kreihbel, 2009). Alexander argues that some teachers even project their own body image anxieties and fear of fat onto their students, whether directly or indirectly, through language or differential treatment (Alexander, 2021) (e.g., harassment and exclusion in physical education, typecasting in the performing arts). Because school has the potential to shape students' values, behaviors, and self-image, it is critical to examine the role of both interpersonal and structural weight stigma and body image education on children.

Fat pedagogies, such as those examined by Constance Russell (2020) and Liz Chenevey (2023), have in the past focused on “the physical environment, documenting how classroom set-up and furniture impacts fat learners, or how fat learners navigate outdoor education or play environments in the schoolyard. Others have investigated specific elementary or secondary

school curricula or programs related to body image, food education, health education, or physical activity” (Russell, 2020, pp. 5-6). Russell adds that, according to several studies, many schools have encouraged teachers to police what their students eat and behave (pp. 6). She emphasizes the importance of “hearing directly from fat learners” in teacher education spaces, “towards a flourishing of all bodies” (pp. 7-8). Chenevey suggests interrogating language practices around fatness, such as using the term “fat” as a neutral descriptor as opposed to “obese,” which she views as “othering” (Chenevey, 2023); she urges teachers and school officials to “deconstruct” biased ideas such as the “gendered and racial implications of fatness, fatness as a moral failing,” and “thinness as health” (2023) by educating themselves and developing critical opinions based on both scientific facts and phenomenologies.

As a classroom educator and literacy specialist, I am led to ask: what are we ignoring and/or endorsing? How do we view “health” and “fitness” in our schools? Can we imagine a kind of care that does not also enact and thrive off of shame? Children’s developing bodies are a site of cultural anxiety, and fatphobia in schools and towards children in general reveal our anxieties about fatness and bodily difference (Evans, 2010; Cramer & Steinwert, 1998). Instead, might we question these anxieties and begin to see the term “prevention” in a new way: prevention of unhealthy habits, of exclusion, of stigma? Might we instead turn towards a construction of healthy self-image and sustainable exercise and nutrition regardless of body size (Tylka et al., 2014)?

Theoretical Frameworks

Three key theoretical lenses shaped the writing of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, as well as my thinking about potential literacy curricula around body image. Health at Every Size®,

affect theory, and critical literacy allowed me, as an author, to interweave the social-emotional pieces of writing about body image in the interests of wellness and equity. I see HAES, affect theory, and critical literacy as deeply related, especially when thinking about books for children. My project was designed not only with a social justice message in mind but also ways of reading: possibilities for transformation and reflection, and the hermeneutics of affect and emotion. I ask: how will children read *Phoebe*? What feelings might arise; what connections or questions may surface? Similarly: how might adults, such as educators and parents, read *Phoebe*? How might they react to a book and/or a curriculum that challenges some of their deepest, decades-long fears and biases around fatness? Most importantly, what is the educator's role in shaping how children feel about their bodies, and how might *Phoebe* – in combination with developmentally appropriate lessons around body image, size discrimination, and patriarchal beauty standards – play a role in buttressing media and critical literacies in the elementary classroom? The critical theories that follow relate directly to body image as a set of lenses and processes shaping both individuals and communities, and the ways in which literature for young people can explore these tensions.

Health at Every Size®

Health at Every Size® was first described by Dr. Lindo (formerly Linda) Bacon in their book *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* in 2008. HAES is the scientific and political lens through which I wrote the book *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, and through which I think about curriculum, criticality, and body literacy. HAES is a holistic framework, an ongoing and evolving process, for thinking about bodies, behavior, and politics rather than a set of fixed answers.

The Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH) “affirms a holistic definition of health ... exist(ing) on a continuum that varies with time and circumstance for each individual....Pursuing health is neither a moral imperative nor an individual obligation” (ASDAH). Schools have a responsibility to teach about healthy behaviors, but so often society’s idea of “health” has “been used to judge, oppress, or determine the value of an individual” (ASDAH). Weight stigma impacts the long-term health outcomes for fat individuals and those perceived as overweight. ASDAH continues: “Discrimination based on weight and size is incredibly prevalent in our current society....Weight-based bullying is currently the most prevalent form of bullying in schools, fat students are less likely to be perceived as intelligent and hard working;” the organization also maintains that the stigma that comes from being fat “creates additional barriers” such as healthcare avoidance and job discrimination contributes to allostatic load (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014), which in turn affects overall health (ASDAH). Fatphobia therefore fuels a paradox in which fat people are automatically deemed unhealthy and, by way of aforementioned factors, become unhealthy.

As an antidote to fatphobia in medicine, ASDAH outlines five HAES principles: Weight Inclusivity, Health Enhancement, Eating for Well-Being, Respectful Care, Life-Enhancing Movement. By focusing on these principles instead of on weight loss and dieting behaviors in isolation, HAES professionals such as doctors and therapists can help their clients achieve health at any weight. In 2006, to test HAES’s effectiveness, researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) separated a group of 78 “obese” women into a HAES program and a “traditional” weight loss program.

Women in the weight-loss program were instructed to eat less, count calories, and exercise more. The Health at Every Size® group was encouraged to eat when they were hungry and to appreciate the feeling of fullness, to make healthy food choices, and to find a style of physical activity that was most enjoyable for them....They were also given

techniques to build their self-esteem and to increase the confidence they had in their bodies. (ASDAH)

Two years into the study, the groups weighed approximately the same, but the women in the weight-centered program fluctuated more greatly in weight, and those in the HAES group “had healthier blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and were more physically active than the dieting group” (ASDAH). Naturally, it takes more than one scientific study with a small control group to convince people to shift their mindsets, let alone change an entire culture. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, a person’s weight is determined by a number of health, genetic, and environmental factors. However, the HAES approach has been endorsed by eating disorder treatment centers such as The Center for Discovery, as well as a growing number of doctors and dietitians (Center for Discovery; National Geographic; Guerin, 2015; Tribeca Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine).

HAES shaped my writing of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* in that it shapes my relationship to my body and to bodies in general. Phoebe’s pursuit of “life-enhancing movement” as a mermaid makes her feel more positively embodied in a world that makes her want to disappear, that makes her feel ashamed to live in her skin. As Bacon writes in *Health at Every Size*:

What's good for thin kids, fat kids and everyone in between, it turns out, is moving their bodies and a healthy mix of foods that taste good and nourish our bodies. Finding activity you enjoy might mean sports or workouts, but it could also be walking, jumping rope with friends, or dancing. (2010)

At the heart of everything, I was intentional in the book to include both main and background characters with a variety of body types, and focus on the ideas of inclusivity, body respect, and eating and movement for well-being. While on the beach with her family, Phoebe

comes to realize that, “Everyone,” regardless of body size, “looks so happy, like their body is a kind of home for their joy” (Walton, 2023, pp. 40).

Affect Theory

“While Dr. Teller examines my ears and eyes and takes my blood pressure, I pretend that the hollow sound the ear device makes is water rushing around me. That the tightening around my arm is the ocean growing heavier, safer....I’ve never felt so large yet so empty, like a fish tank with no life inside....I picture my whole body swelling. I picture a whale sucking in krill. I wish that my hunger could stop....I start to look around: bathing suits squeezing skin, hair and marks and maybe even scales, and all sorts of monstrous limbs. And the feeling begins to ripple deep down again.”

– from *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* (2023)

Affect theory is a far-reaching philosophical, literary, and sociological concept that for the purposes of this study I will define as the process of organizing, conveying, and examining embodied emotional experiences in literary texts. Matthew Arthur writes that affect theory focuses on the “imbrications of body and world that ... hold a glut of meanings in generative drift: from emotion, feeling, mood, sensation, and vibe to action, atmosphere, capacity, force, intensity, potential, or relation and are “especially bodily” (Arthur, 2021). Anne Stevens draws from Silvan Tomkins’ seminal theory of nine affects to describe the variety of embodied emotional responses: anger-rage, shame-humiliation, fear-terror, enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, distress-anguish, “dis smell,” disgust, and surprise-startle, and calls them the “primary motivators of human behavior” (Stevens, 2021, pp. 252). In *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, Phoebe goes through quite a few of these affective motions, namely shame-humiliation as she faces weight stigma, disgust as she internalizes stigma towards herself and others, and enjoyment-joy as she learns to embrace who she is and the diversity of bodies in the world.

In terms of affect theory's application to literature, Stephen Ahern argues that affect theory describes "the motivation of fictional character or the response of reader or audience" as specifically "embodied experience, as analytic category, as interpretive paradigm" by readers and critics (Ahern, 2019, pp. 1-2). His main guiding questions for literary theorists and educators interested in affect theory are:

1. What are the limits of representation, especially as regards fictional characters by definition removed from the quickenings of affect that impinge on physical bodies?
2. What are the sensual resonances, the aesthetic engagements, the affective investments of readers and writers?
3. What identities, what affective assemblages ... take shape in the spaces opened by heightened emotion? (pp. 3)

While writing of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, I was thinking about how different external forces, such as weight stigma, affected (literally) Phoebe as a character, and how those affects manifested in her body and therefore my writing. I was interested in Phoebe's embodied experiences of shame, joy, anxiety, and positive and negative detachment, and how I could communicate these affects via, for instance, metaphor and personification. (My illustrator was also attentive to these affects.) I was interested in how my readers – upper elementary students and teachers alike – would respond to and connect with the characters: how their critical, emotional, and empathetic consciousnesses could be stretched by way of description, illustration, and imagery. Hence, I wrote towards the highly emotional and as a result transformative powers of storytelling: the embodied emotional experiences of my characters, and ultimately my readers, and how these interweave. I wrote equally towards body shame and fat joy, hoping to depict these dynamics in nuanced and accessible ways for young readers.

Body image and weight stigma, as well as critical literacy itself, are inextricable from questions of emotion: how the world around us makes us feel, how the people around us make us feel. Felix Diaz writes that

The observation that people whose bodies do not fit cultural images of beauty ... will suffer from a low body image, makes sense within a general psychological theory linking “social comparison” to “self-concept,” with an internalization process occurring somewhere in between cultural discourses and private unpleasant feelings. (Diaz, 2018, pp. 6)

He goes on to argue that body image as a “shared problematic,” affective in nature, and it matters “how we go along with confronting, preventing, or provoking ... suffering; how we name and articulate the experience in words ... how concerns with our body appearance organize and regulate our social relations in everyday life” (pp. 8). Body image feelings in a “private” sense relate to the social determinants of health as described by Lindo Bacon and Lucy Aphramor, such as a sense of coherence and agency, and allostatic load (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014, pp. 102-3). Allostatic load refers to “the cumulative burden of chronic stress and life events,” and weight stigma leads to allostatic overload for many fat people, reducing their ability to “cope” (Guidi, 2021). Fat people are often presented with “identity-threatening situations” which “trigger involuntary physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions,” and “increase cardiovascular stress responses and negative stress-related emotions” (Major et al., 2011).

Social justice and the fight against fatphobia require attention to these affects, as well as the development of collective empathy. In literature and literacy education, I propose having students think about the affective experiences of characters subject to weight stigma. In upper elementary ELA classes, a teacher versed in affect theory asks: how do we feel in our bodies reading this text? What are we thinking about or making connections to? How can studying

character emotions, how those emotions are embodied or expressed, and how we as readers respond to and empathize with these “affective assemblages” introduce possibilities for societal transformation?

Critical Literacy

Vivian Maria Vasquez, Hilary Janks, and Barbara Comber state that critical literacy

involves making sense of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and questioning these systems...Critical literacy work needs to focus on social issues...and the ways in which we use language and other semiotic resources to shape our understanding of these issues. The discourses we use to take up such issues work to shape how people are able to—or not able to—live their lives in more or less powerful ways. (Vasquez et al., 2019, pp. 307).

For the purposes of this project, critical literacy is the skill of reading texts with an eye towards how they shape “the social construction of the self”: our beliefs and our biases, and how texts reinforce power dynamics in society (Shore, 1999, pp. 3). Describing “implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology” (Behrman, 2006, pp. 490), critical literacy empowers students to examine what media, texts, and other discourses have taught them; question the status quo; and work towards untangling and dismantling biases. Since “texts are never (politically) neutral” (Vasquez et al., 2019, pp. 300), literacy curricula designed with criticality in mind ask, “What stories have (you and your students) adopted as truth” (Whitty & McKay, 2020, pp. 170), and why? Educators can and should introduce critical literacy in primary classrooms to help students develop critical thinking skills early on; for those of us who teach third grade and up, critical literacy becomes more relevant as children move from learning to read, to reading to learn (Center for Public Education, 2015). For young preteens, who come into their classrooms eager “sensemakers” (Aukerman & Jensen, 2020, pp. 107), “critical thinking

can itself serve as a way to channel some of their new energy, curiosity, and desire for independence” at a time of “heightened capacity for abstraction and formal logic” (Reboot Foundation). As Pam Whitty and Heather McKay maintain, “Classrooms are places where identities are constructed and enacted, individually and collectively. Classrooms are places of knowing, becoming, and feeling” (Whitty & McKay, 2020, pp. 172).

In “Media Literacy Education for Diverse Societies,” Annamária Neag, Çiğdem Bozdağ, and Koen Leurs maintain that schools need a “more inclusive and intersectional approach to media literacy education....It should advocate a critical understanding of the mediated construction of reality and offer grounds to successfully challenge dominant representations, and it should equip people with the skills ... to participate and raise their own voices” (Neag et al., 2022). Critical literacy practices are essential to the education of children in an increasingly connected, complicated world, where dominant narratives are more unconsciously embedded into public discourse. Simon Wilksch, Maria Tiggemann, and Tracy Wade add that a curriculum incorporating critical and media literacy makes psychological sense in that it “represents a promising prevention approach designed to decrease media internalization ... draws on cognitive-behavior theory and ... aims to empower students to adopt a critical evaluation of media content so that they can identify, analyze, challenge, and propose alternatives to cultural ideals presented in the mass media” (Wilksch et al., 2006, pp. 385). I will elaborate further on critical literacy moves, lessons, and project ideas for use in upper elementary classrooms in the section “Curricular Possibilities.” Constance Russell, in *Fat Pedagogy and the Disruption of Weight-Based Oppression: Toward the Flourishing of All Bodies*, provides a rationale for intentionally crafted critical literacy discourses around fatphobia.

It is a rare day I do not encounter fatphobia, expressed in casual ‘fat talk’ as friends and colleagues discuss food choices, exercise, and the fit of clothing, or in rhetoric about the

alleged ‘obesity epidemic’ so prevalent in the news and in health and educational circles. A staple of media, public health campaigns, and advertisements for the hugely profitable weight loss industry, dominant obesity discourse privileges thin and athletic bodies, fuels fat hatred, and encourages weight-based oppression. Education is a powerful site for the (re)production of weight-based oppression, yet critical pedagogy has remained mostly silent about fatness until very recently. Indeed, critical pedagogy is not immune from engaging in dominant obesity discourse, particularly in passing comments about the childhood ‘obesity crisis.’ (Russell, 2020, pp. 1561)

Literacy classrooms have a responsibility to not only equip students with the tools to teach towards a “critical understanding of the mediated construction of reality” but also “successfully challenge dominant representations” of fatness (Neag et al., 2022). Critical literacy is tied up with affect and emotion, with social determinants of health such as community and social inclusion ([World Health Organization](#)). How might examining a text or actively engaging in socio political discourse around body weight influence how students feel about themselves and their place in the world? In other words, “how can we as educators construct storying intra-actions that lead to knowing ourselves and our place in authentic and expansive ways?” (Whitty & McKay, 2020, pp. 170)

A book like *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, which discusses critical literacy and involves a child making sense of, reading, and responding to the world around her, presents an opportunity for students reading the text to examine their own biases and feelings around body weight. *Phoebe* was written, therefore, as a metatext for the biopsychosocial discourse of body image. Recall my working definition of body image for this paper; body image is “a dynamic, multidimensional set of lenses, processes, and actions related to one’s own body, bodies in general, and cultural notions of beauty, health, and socioeconomic worth.” Phoebe’s lack of critical literacy and eventual exposure to it informs her relationship to body image and fatphobia.

A moment in the book that embodies this idea is when Mommy and Sage debrief with Phoebe following her comment, “I can’t stop thinking about how fat I am”:

Mommy and Sage look at each other. “Doctors aren’t right about everything, Phoebe. It’s best if you learn that now,” Mommy says. “Did you know that after I gave birth to you, my doctor told me that I needed to lose weight? ... I used to say awful things to myself every day, but now I’ve learned that that voice isn’t *really* mine. (Walton, 2023, pp. 41-2).

The “voice” Mommy refers to is depicted in the illustration on page 42: the media and other people. This moment in the book quietly urges the reader to find their own critical “voice,” to develop a sense of what is really “theirs” when it comes to self- and body image. *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* is intended to awaken young readers’ minds and generate conversations around how society views weight gain and those at a higher (or statistically average, even) body weight. When it comes to weight stigma, critical literacy moves in instruction provide opportunities for “reading the world as a text that (can) be deconstructed and reconstructed and “to deconstruct, disrupt, reconstruct, and sometimes dismantle problematic practices within and outside of the school” (Vasquez et al., 2019).

Body Image and Literacy Education

All teachers who focus on English Language Arts (ELA) know how directly literature can shape children’s values and beliefs about the world. I have written previously about how critical literacy is an important component of a curriculum that promotes positive body image, and I will continue to elaborate on this idea later in this section. Literacy is an important way to interrogate body image because the books we share with children, as well as the media our students consume daily (e.g., on the Internet), can alternately interrogate, perpetuate, or dismantle beliefs around body image.

Literature that includes developmentally appropriate discussions of body image and/or includes main characters of different body types (whether body sizes or other physical traits) provides an opportunity for students to see themselves – their bodies, thoughts, and feelings – represented in positive and nuanced ways. Rudine Sims Bishop’s framework of “windows,” “mirrors,” and “sliding glass doors” applies here (Sims Bishop, 1990); do children feel seen by the story? During or after reading a book, do they view those unlike them with more compassion and thoughtfulness? Do the books in your classroom engender empathy in students for other people, and allow children to celebrate what makes a person, and our communities, unique? In addition to reading characters and story dynamics with a critical eye, children must also be given practice in feeling, in visualization, in empathy. Teachers must interweave the critical, intellectual, and social-emotional pieces of text analysis and production to effectively integrate a unit or set of lessons on body image into the ELA curriculum.

Fat Representation in Children’s Literature

A discussion of classroom libraries and unit studies is warranted. It is easy as teachers to inherit the books our predecessors left behind without thinking critically about what obsolete, oppressive messages may have also been left behind. It is easy for teachers to recycle ELA curricula that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Children’s literature, like much of adult literature, is brimming with fatphobia. Fatphobia in these books takes the form of insults, jokes, and caricatures, and can inform character development itself. In popular children’s books such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl and the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling – to name just a few – fat characters are typically depicted as bullies, lazy, ugly, villainous, or gluttonous (Puc, 2020; Glassman, 2021; Nolfi, 2011; Amato, 2019; Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn,

2010). When not depicted in an explicitly negative way, fat characters may take on the role of “friend,” “comic relief,” or “sidekick” (Amato, 2019, pp. 2), or alternatively “diet and obsess about their appearance” (Nolfi, 2011, pp. 55). It is even more difficult to find positive and neutral representations of fat characters of color and/or with disabilities (Roos, 2022). An article by Suzie Glassman references a study from Dr. Janna Howard, which found that “verbal insults about body size and nonverbal scenes depicting size negatively appeared in 85%” of G and PG movies released between 2012 and 2015, and that “weight stigma was observed in 3 out of every 10 lines they analyzed” (Glassman, 2021). Glassman goes on to ask:

What does it mean when we’re given the idea that being fat is the very last thing we want to be when from a very young age? For me, it meant an all-out war against my body from age 12. I rarely liked what I saw in the mirror, and I went on countless diets before the age of 20. For others, it may cause an implicit dislike toward larger bodies (even if there’s no outward sign of weight bias). (Glassman, 2021).

Nicole Ann Amato introduces an additional layer of thinking about when writers *do* give fat characters a voice and a character arc, “many of these texts position their fat characters in conflict with their body, a conflict they must overcome to find happiness, success, and internal peace....(Their) narrative arc is still defined by (their) relationship ... with (their) weight” (Amato, 2019, pp. 2). She also proposes a question that will be useful to educators when thinking about the books in their classroom libraries:

How do young adult writers and graphic novelists construct a character’s fatness? What textual and visual resources does a writer utilize to communicate the fatness of a character to their readers, and what do these constructions reveal about the normalization or othering of fatness? (Amato, 2019, pp. 2)

I am aware that in *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*, the story arc I have chosen to focus on is a young girl’s struggle with her fatness and body image, and that this may fall under the category of being “defined by one’s relationship to weight.” Chelsey Roos argues that

a book about body positivity isn't enough. We know that all kinds of kids deserve to see themselves in all kinds of stories: fantasy stories, adventure stories, funny stories. If the only time you see a body like yours is in a book specifically about how bodies like yours are okay, you might start to wonder if the rest of the world really sees it that way. (Roos, 2022)

The explicit purpose of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* is to expose the perniciousness of fatphobia (and the shame and stigma associated with it) to an uneducated audience subject to “routine exposure to idealized images of thinness and the lack of positive portrayals of females with larger figures” (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010, pp. 423). The book is also authentic: based on my own experiences and of those close to me, and ends with a positive message both about and beyond weight, that bodies are vehicles for joy, for experiencing the world to our fullest potentials. I agree with Roos and Amato, however, that fat girls deserve to see themselves represented in positive or at least neutral ways in genre fiction, where their body is a fact of their lives but not the locus of the book's conflict.

Examples of books with both positive and neutral fat representation are *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps (2021), and *Piecing Me Together* and *Some Places More Than Others*, both by Renee Watson (2017 and 2019). *Starfish* is a novel in verse about a girl named Ellie, bullied about her weight at school and by her own family, who finds “her safe space — her swimming pool — where she feels weightless in a fat-obsessed world” (Fipps/Penguin Random House, 2021). In the pool, Ellie does not have to live by the “fat girl rules” society has forced upon her, without her consent, since she was young. The book traces Ellie's development from a girl who feels safe only in the pool to a girl who no longer has to apologize for the space she takes up. In terms of a literacy unit on body image, I see *Starfish* as a suitable companion text for *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* in their shared aquatic imagery and reckonings with fatphobia, and contrasts in plot, structure, and characterization (e.g., Phoebe has a supportive family while Ellie does not). Both

books preach acceptance of the self and of body diversity and, to paraphrase Amato, feature fat girls in their quests to exist on their own terms, free of discrimination.

Piecing Me Together is not a text about fatphobia but rather features a fat main character, named Jade, a Black scholarship student at a mostly White private high school trying to succeed in a world that feels set against her. While there are instances of fatphobia in the book, being fat is not the cornerstone of the book's conflict; rather, the text hinges on Jade's intersecting identities (Watson, 2017), on Jade as a whole, complicated human being. Watson's 2019 novel, *Some Places More Than Others*, also features a fat character, named Amara, "and the plot has nothing to do with her weight;" Watson comments in an interview with Deborah Kalb that "it was freeing to let a big girl exist in a book without her size being mentioned at all" (Watson/Kalb, 2019). Including either of these books in an ELA curriculum about body image alongside *Phoebe* or *Starfish* would provide a nuanced picture of the fat experience, of fatness being a part of someone's identity but not, by any means, their entire story.

Ultimately, it is critical that literacy educators include books by authors who "champion fat-positive representation, which is key for allowing young readers to see themselves represented ... and not fall into the pervasive trap of toxic diet culture, which urges everyone to be smaller and take up less space" (Puc, 2020). In the section "Further Reading," I will provide a list of children's and young adult books in addition to *Starfish* and *Piecing Me Together* that contain positive and/or neutral representations of fatness, as well as professional development resources for educators looking to support themselves and their students. Amato concludes with the following questions for classroom teachers:

1. What 'truths' does your text selection and/or classroom library portray about fat characters?
2. Do the fat characters in your texts, as Machado (2017) muses in her essay, 'get to just be'?

3. What questions can you pose to students to support them in taking critical stances towards readings of fat bodies in young adult literature, in the media, and within their lived social circles? (2019)

Curricular Possibilities

Consider the definition of literacies in your current space – what are your beliefs, and how are they enacted? ... How might you provision your learning space with diverse texts to open new conversations and build dialogue about and between a variety of worldviews?

– Pam Whitty & Heather McKay, “Walking Together in and Through Stories,” from *Affect, Embodiment, and Place in Critical Literacy*

While I will not provide any lesson plans specifically for *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* as part of this project, in this section I will offer ways to discuss and teach about works of literature, both fiction and nonfiction, that concern body image, with children, as well as possibilities for the integration of literacy and social-emotional learning in classrooms in the interest of developing students’ positive body image. The five key questions that we must consider in designing a unit of literacy study on body image are:

1. What are our students’ preexisting beliefs about body image and body diversity?
2. What are our students’ personal experiences related to weight and body image?
3. How can literacy classes offer “sliding glass doors” into thinking about body image and weight stigma in our culture, and about one’s personal journey towards positive self-image?
4. How can we make a curriculum, unit, or study of body image relevant and responsive to our students?
5. How can we expand students’ critical and emotional literacy in ways that are authentic and engaging?

These guiding questions will ensure that a unit of study around body image literature will take into account critical literacy and social-emotional learning (SEL). Additionally, we must take into account New York State Standards for both ELA and SEL so that such a unit of study could be feasibly taught in compliance with state standards. A unit centered around body image would not only allow children to become more critical of fatphobia in society but also help them to develop self- and social awareness, belonging, appreciation of diversity, healthy management of emotions (i.e., as opposed to directing negative feelings towards the body), and unconditional self-worth. The New York State Social-Emotional Learning Goals and Standards include:

1. Young people develop a self-awareness that nurtures and affirms a strong sense of identity, informs decisions about their actions, and builds a sense of agency.
2. Young people use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish, navigate, and maintain mutually supportive relationships with individuals and groups that nurture a strong sense of belonging.
3. [Upper elementary students will] identify and practice self regulation skills and coping strategies that help them to express their emotions....[Students will] describe aspects of their identity, such as strengths, skills, beliefs, qualities, opinions, and interests, including those reflective of membership in multiple identity groups. (2022)

Social-emotional goals such as increasing sensitivity to the self and others, developing strategies for inclusive and healthy relationships, and building coping skills are directly relevant to third-to-fifth graders as they “become profoundly aware of the intricacies and subtleties of the world around them” (Wood, 2017, pp. 96). Crucial to this stage of growing “self-definition” and “concern(s) about global justice” (pp. 96-7) is a social-emotionally driven ELA curriculum that supports healthy identity formation, self-image, and empathy, especially in the years preceding puberty when children are less “self-conscious about their changing bodies” (pp. 112) and can think critically about power, prejudice, and biases more readily than in previous grades. Both the previously stated SEL goals and New York State’s Next Generation ELA Standards could be

incorporated into body image-centered literature studies, read-alouds, and book groups in the upper elementary grades. A few relevant ELA Standards follow.

1. “Determine a theme or central idea of text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize a text.” (4R2) There are opportunities during a read-aloud or study of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* for students to analyze, discuss, and apply to their lives “themes” of body acceptance and size discrimination.
2. “Recognize genres and make connections to other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.” (4R9) Students should be able to compare and contrast depictions of weight in different texts that they have read, identify “cultural perspectives” within books that reflect bias against fat people, and relate what they read to “personal events” of weight-based teasing they have witnessed and/or experienced.
3. “Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely” (4W3d) and “demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings” (4L5). *Phoebe* contains multiple instances of figurative language, such as simile and personification, and painstaking sensory detail to emphasize Phoebe’s worldview and inner feelings (i.e., affective experiences); students should be able to identify examples of sensorial and figurative language in the text, discuss its purpose, and attempt to apply it to their own writing (e.g., in the form of a personal narrative or response to the text; a poem or song).

Reading *Phoebe* aloud to a class as a mentor text during a writing unit or as a guided reading book, for example, can address state standards if the teacher is attentive to the language and structure of the text, characterization, and themes of the story and how these relate to developmental and sociocultural imperatives. Jennifer O’Dea has compiled an extensive review

of current body image education programs: their pedagogical methods and aims, projected outcomes, and implications for the formation of positive body image and the prevention of disordered eating behaviors. She found that the most effective programs focused on critical literacy, built a strong foundation for high student self-image, were culturally responsive and multimodal in nature, and involved parents and caregivers (O’Dea, 2004). These programs saw “moderate improvements in beliefs, attitudes and behaviors such as body image, body dissatisfaction, self-image and dieting as well as increased knowledge” (pp. 14), and taught students “self-efficacy” (pp. 14), self-esteem, body diversity, criticality, and “the positive aspects of healthy eating, rather than focusing on ‘junk foods,’ ‘good and bad’ foods or high-fat foods” (pp. 30).

Though O’Dea was researching health education programs, these same qualities apply to potential ELA curricula, which should hinge on critical literacy, cultural relevance, and social-emotional learning. Criticality and cultural responsiveness go hand-in-hand, as they take into consideration students’ diverse everyday experiences with body image messaging and size discrimination. As detailed previously, programs with a focus on critical literacy teach students how to read media with a skeptical eye, and that everything we read has a slant or bias. Key questions include: 1.) What is this piece of media trying to get you to do or think? 2.) How and why might this message affect different populations of people? 3.) How can the narrative be challenged and transformed? Edward Behrman argues that the practice of critical literacy involves

identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts. A critical literacy agenda should therefore encourage teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed. (2006, pp. 490, emphasis added)

In terms of cultural responsiveness, one could instead think of it as *reality* responsiveness: attunement to what students are actually going through and experiencing within their community culture and microcultures. Lesson activities could include a “gallery walk” of looking at social media posts or magazine advertisements as artifacts of the dominant narrative around weight. In groups, children could complete collaborative write-arounds or turn-and-talks about how certain images make them feel and what messages they send. These inquiry-based activities could naturally lead into discussions of body positivity and body neutrality and how these ideas could or already play a role in students’ lives.

Intersectionality is not supplemental but rather vital for educating students about body image (Himmelstein et al., 2007; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Edwards George & Franko, 2009). Literacy educators must ask themselves: what is the population of my school? How do they experience or talk about body image and bodies? What is important and/or concerning to them? (Perhaps a survey, conferences, or interviews could help educators gather some of this information pre-instruction.) In “Cultural Issues in Eating Pathology and Body Image Among Children and Adolescents,” Jessica Edwards George and Debra Franko discuss how sociocultural, environmental, and genetic factors mingle to shape the etiology of eating disorders across microcultures. The authors argue that prevention programs have not been well enough developed to address the varied needs and experiences of non-white ethnic groups (Edwards George & Franko, 2009), as body image issues often look different for people depending on their intersecting identities (Van Den Berg et al., 2011). Effective educational programs in schools must address and remediate these gaps in attention, especially if the school serves a multicultural population. It is also critical to involve parents and caregivers in student learning outside of the classroom. Depending on the population, one should translate take-home activities and

information into multiple languages, provide a variety of handouts and home activities for different kinds of families, and explain the importance of family partnership.

Instruction around body image must be hands-on and multimodal; students should interact with content using all five senses, and instruction must be differentiated as much as possible. Interactive research projects, dioramas, fashion shows, videos, coding activities, visualization and drawing, and Tik Tok creation are all engaging ways that students can explore what they are learning about body image and be assessed for understanding. Fairfax County Public Schools have compiled a list of critical thinking strategies that could be adapted to fit literacy educators' goals around analyzing power and weight stigma in texts. I have named some of these strategies here, along with questioning scripts for instructors interested in teaching *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*:

1. *Questioning*: “Students who take responsibility for asking their own questions become more productive and engaged in their learning processes. Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, involves questioning our individual learning processes.” (FCPS)
 - a. What questions do you have after reading this text? For the class, for the characters, for your community?
2. *Visualization*: “Use sensory information to stimulate imagination with both spoken and written words.” (FCPS)
 - a. Draw a picture of what you see when Phoebe describes her “underwater world.”
 - i. Students draw or paint pictures of what they see as the teacher reads, without the teacher showing the pictures straight away.

- b. Draw a picture of Phoebe’s reality. How does it contrast, visually and emotionally, with her fantasy? What does that tell you about the purpose of her fantasy?
 - c. Make a mind movie of Phoebe on the beach. What does she see and experience? How do you see her changing as a character?
3. *Point of View*: “Examine an issue from many perspectives will provide students with a good model for open-ended receptive thinking and empathizing with the opinions of others.” (FCPS)
- a. How does Dr. Teller’s point of view about weight differ from Mommy’s or Sage’s?
 - i. Students make a T-chart or do a quick jot on a Post-It.
 - b. How does Phoebe’s view of herself and other people change from the beginning to the end of the book?
 - i. Students write and draw Phoebe’s before-and-after.
 - c. How does your point of view about weight gain or fatness differ from a classmate’s? How might your personal experiences inform your point of view?
 - i. Students turn-and-talk.
4. *Analogies*: “This structure for thinking helps students relate material to previously learned concepts as well as generate new comparisons....Working with analogies gives students a structure for generating creative ideas, seeing complex relationships, and making unusual comparisons.” (FCPS)

- a. How is Phoebe’s “underwater world” similar to or different from our world?
- b. How is Phoebe’s experience similar to or different from yours?

Another strategy for teaching the concepts included in the book would be to create strategic book groups for a unit of study around critical literacy (as a topic), or in support of a curriculum already informed by critical literacy (as a large-scale lens for studying ELA). I mention a few books in detail in “Fat Representation in Children’s Literature” and include more under “Appendix: Further Reading” that could serve as guided reading texts following an interactive read-aloud of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*. However, book groups do not have to center around body image but can relate to other curricular themes such as identity, empathy, intersectionality, and social inclusion / exclusion. Students should be grouped by reading level, skillset, and/or area of interest as they trace character development, authorial decisions, and figurative language and describe how their findings support the texts’ themes.

Suggestions for culminating projects include producing what Behrman terms “countertexts,” which challenge the prevailing narrative – in our case weightism – from media and society. After viewing an advertisement or reading a book with anti-fat bias and examining the language practices therein, students could fashion body neutral advertisements, write a persuasive essay urging local policymakers to make public buses more fat-friendly, or write a poem or short story about a fat character without relying on stereotypes – to name only a few possibilities. Additionally, students can “engage in social action projects” (Behrman, 2006, pp. 494-5), such as working with body acceptance organizations or writing petitions to local stores to make their clothing selections more size-inclusive, which would allow them to transform intellect into meaningful social change in their communities. It is important that children see the

connections between what they are learning in class and what is going on in their communities, in their worlds, and empower them to

In my research, I located two body image curricula from which literacy educators can pull and adapt lessons, especially in conjunction with fiction and nonfiction texts. The first is the Body Image Curriculum by educational consultants and behavior specialists Nicky Hutchinson and Chris Calland. The curriculum contains two stages: Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, which are aimed at younger and older students, respectively. Fundamental goals of the program include the improvement of children's self-esteem and appreciation of body diversity. The program's message is for children to value what their bodies can do as opposed to what they look like which, according to O'Dea, is crucial in helping children recognize and confront weightism. Additionally, this program and its research rationale lay important groundwork for reality/cultural responsiveness, multimodality, and the involvement of families. Lessons include opportunities for games, partner work, open discussion, and creative projects, which will engage and accommodate students of diverse interests, needs, and learning styles. The authors also provide take-home resources such as caregiver letter templates and body image self-assessments for students' family members.

The second example, Full of Ourselves, developed by Catherine Steiner-Adair and Lisa Sjostrom, focuses on female students' holistic wellness, especially with regards to body image, physical activity, and critical literacy, with the hopes of creating stronger and more confident girl leaders. Key features include lessons (with built-in discussions) around eating, weight discrimination, relationships, and media; handouts, activities, and concrete affirmations; instructional information for adult and peer leaders; roleplay and game ideas; and, similar to Hutchinson and Calland's program, tips for involving families. Full of Ourselves was evaluated

for effectiveness over a five-year period in the late 1990s in schools around Boston, with over 1,000 students taking part (Steiner-Adair & Sjostrom, 2006, pp. ix), and the program's implementation over 2-4 months (pp. xv) was associated with increased "body satisfaction" (back cover). Educators interested in using this program could also expand lessons, discussions, and activities to include male students and those who are gender nonconforming.

Programs like *Full of Ourselves* and the *Body Image Curriculum* provide ample opportunities for students' pursuit of self-actualization around body image, and jumpstart them on a lifelong process of self-authoring around embodiment. But it is not only what we teach but *how*; Maren Aukerman and Krista Jensen urge us to "share authentically with (our) class(es) ... bring forward ... stories that bring a lump to (our) throat(s)" (Aukerman & Jensen, 2020, pp. 108). Teachers must be unafraid to challenge their own fears and biases in this work, to parse out their feelings and thoughts in front of children, to model for students the process of becoming empathetic and critical thinkers. If we are not genuinely invested, our students will certainly not be. In literacy classrooms, the curricula we employ and design must consider how we can best get students to authentically involve themselves in thinking about body image, not only for the duration of the unit but for the rest of their lives. Social-emotionally competent literacy instruction must ask: how can we use literature to coach students to talk about bodies in supportive, nuanced, and justice-minded ways? What can we replace body judgment with? And for our particularly shrewd and self-aware students: if I have judgments about my body, what might that indicate about my self-worth?

Fatphobia is not only a political and cultural issue but a social-emotional one, a manifestation of low self-worth and emotional wounds (Phillips & Halder, 2019, pp. 96-7). In other words, body dissatisfaction does not only *cause* low self-esteem, but children with already

low self-esteem are more likely to fall victim to diet culture; their bodies are a proxy for how they feel about themselves. What are our students *really* struggling with – both on personal and political levels – when they engage in fatphobic talk and behavior? Body shame does not happen in isolation. As discussed, there are a variety of sociopolitical, environmental, and psychological factors that contribute to body image. The book I have written depicts how fatphobia in the form of weight-based teasing, media showcasing the thin ideal, and one doctor’s reinforcement of such ideals affects the mental health of a young girl. As educators read and instruct around *Phoebe*, it is crucial that they and their students are attentive to how negative body image is created, how we can transform our biases and self-talk, and increase our ability to see people for their full humanity. If we can teach students to be kind to themselves, to view themselves as more than just a number on the scale, then we have given them a powerful gift – self-love and -acceptance – that will hopefully radiate out towards their communities.

Preface to *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*

Phoebe is a nine-year-old girl living with her mother (“Mommy”) and older sister, Sage, in present-day New Jersey. She is a deep thinker, sagacious observer of the world around her, and precocious at describing her feelings. She dreams of being a “blue-eyed, pink-haired” mermaid swimming through the ocean, her body capable, all-powerful, beautiful as it moves. However, her recent struggles with body image and weight-based discrimination at school have left her feeling empty and confused, and a visit to the doctor before her family leaves for vacation at Point Pleasant only heightens those feelings. Dr. Teller tells Phoebe’s mother that Phoebe needs to “lose a few pounds” before she starts fourth grade or she will not be considered healthy. Now, wherever she looks, Phoebe can only judge the bodies of the people around her through the

distorted lens through which she sees herself: one of fatphobia and self-hatred. That is, her self-image translates to how she sees others. Furthermore, Phoebe is suddenly terrified of eating the pad thai Sage offers her on the drive down the shore, and of wearing a bathing suit at the beach.

The turning point of the story occurs when Phoebe tells Sage that she “can’t stop thinking about how fat (she) is.” In response, Sage invites Phoebe to play mermaids at the beach, during which Phoebe comments that “underwater, people’s legs look a little like mermaid tails, too,” signaling a newfound appreciation for the role that bodies play in carrying our joys and journeys through the world. A healing conversation between the family members follows, during which Mommy and Sage offer anecdotes about their own struggles with body image, letting Phoebe know that it is *society* that is wrong, not Phoebe, that you cannot know someone’s entire story by looking at their body. Our narrator concludes that “maybe it will take a while for (her) to *really* feel like a mermaid. Maybe some days (she) will need to be brave. But now (she) know(s) that sometimes, to see things more clearly, all you have to do is look at the world beneath the surface” (Walton, 2023).

The message of the book is to celebrate different ways of being healthy and beautiful, and to recognize our bodies not as aesthetic objects but as “homes for (our) joy,” as Phoebe says. As an author I emphasize the principle of *body neutrality*, which Dr. Susan Albers defines as “acceptance and having respect for one’s body rather than love”; Anne Poirier adds that body neutrality is about “prioritizing the body’s function and what it can do rather than its appearance” (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). In a scene from the book, Phoebe looks around at the different kinds of people on the beach and notices how they are all using their bodies as vehicles for joy. She not only begins to see beauty in other people (and herself) but also who they truly are inside and

what their bodies can do for them. For instance, playing mermaids symbolizes Phoebe's pursuit of "life-enhancing movement" (ASDAH) that helps her to feel confident, happy, and healthy.

As I wrote the book, I primarily focused on the affect theory piece of the narration: the embodied emotional experiences of a child dissatisfied with her body and the varied ways she copes with those feelings. Phoebe's world is divided into her underwater sanctuary, where she feels positively embodied, and the real world, where she feels restricted and despondent. I worked to craft precise metaphors and lyrical sentences so that Phoebe's thoughts, feelings, and experiences in her body were conveyed powerfully and accurately. Additionally, I was attentive to how adults' and peers' words affect children, drawing from my own experiences as well as those of my peers and family members. How do words, judgements, and images "pulse like blood in (a child's) ears over and over again;" how do they "suffocate" children? Mommy and Sage's words and actions serve as an antidote to the negative treatment Phoebe experiences, and demonstrate the more effective, justice-oriented ways we can talk to children about health, body image, and eating in ways that do not solely focus on weight and appearance.

The critical literacy piece of the book is less outwardly apparent but nonetheless a crucial part of the story, as it explains a great deal about the causes of Phoebe's negative body image, especially at her stage of development. As a nine-year-old, Phoebe is "profoundly aware" and is just beginning to learn how to critically read "the intricacies and subtleties of the world around (her)" (Wood, 2017, pp. 96). Although social media does not directly shape Phoebe's body image, it is relevant to her mother's, as evidenced by the illustration on page 41. Phoebe will soon enter a stage of her development – that is, middle school – in which she will likely get a smartphone and join social media sites, exposing her to countless diet culture fads, airbrushed and edited photos of faces and bodies, and fatphobic messaging. Readers of the book are likely in

a similar stage of their growth, inheriting from adults, teenagers, and media diet culture beliefs and societal “attempts to manage ontologically insecure futures” through children (Evans, 2010, pp. 21). Dr. Teller’s endorsement is particularly difficult, as medical professionals are regarded as a source of authority on health; people do not often think about how doctors, similarly to non-doctors, sometimes fall victim to bias against fat people (Fahs, 2019; Penn Medicine, 2017). By the end of the book, following her experiences at the beach and conversation with her mother and sister, Phoebe has begun her journey towards body neutrality and accepting herself for who she is, which will allow her to think critically about the idealization of thinness as she encounters such beliefs in future contexts.

I outlined in the section “Curricular Possibilities” some ways of incorporating *Phoebe* into a literacy unit around body image, SEL, and/or critical literacy. Additional ideas for lessons include: 1.) an interactive read-aloud followed by a writing activity (e.g., poetry using metaphor, freewriting about body image, keeping a body or self-image journal), 2.) book groups in which students read similar texts that focus on body image and/or critical literacy and compare/contrast experiences of the characters, 3.) a research project about body image in which students (with the help of a school media specialist and/or health educator) give presentations about body image and how it relates to the texts they have studied in ELA, 4.) produce what Behrman calls “countertexts” (Behrman, 2006, pp. 494) that creatively challenge the dominant narratives they see depicted in the media, and/or 5.) “engage in social action projects” (pp. 495) schoolwide or with local organizations.

These activities and other pedagogical strategies outlined in “Curricular Possibilities” demonstrate the richness and nuance a book like *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid* could add to any ELA curriculum, especially when teaching into ideas such as critical literacy, social-emotional

learning, and celebration of diversity and the self. In a society where children are continuously marinating in anti-fat bias, well-selected literature around body image provides a powerful counter-narrative: an opportunity for educators to raise awareness of weight discrimination and promote self-acceptance.

Text of *Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid*

Phoebe the Mighty Mermaid



by **Veronica B. Walton**
illustrations by **Sienna Sun**

My name is Phoebe, and I was born in the summer. In fact, yesterday was both the summer solstice *and* my birthday. I'm nine years old now.

Mommy and my sister, Sage, were born in the summer, too. I like to think of us all as summer spirits: Sage is tall and full, like a planet thick with fire. Mommy is small and quick, like a ripple coming and going.

Me? I'm a blue-eyed, pink-haired mermaid. I was born to swim, to float freely across the endless waves.



This year, like every year, Mommy, Sage, and I are going *down the shore*. That's New Jersey-speak for *to the beach*. Last summer when we were at Point Pleasant, I spent all of my time in the ocean. Underwater, everything is softer. The world echoes and throbs and fades. I can taste the memory of it in my mouth: salty, frigid, ancient in ways I can't understand.



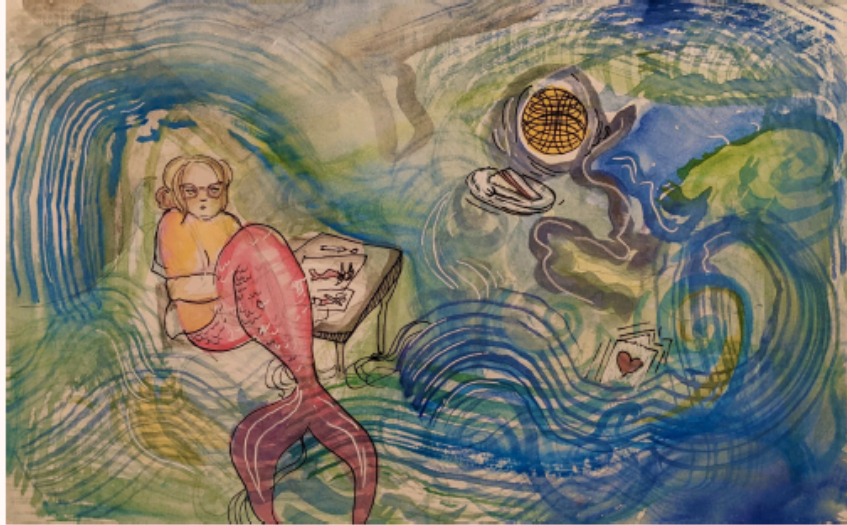
The sea pulsed like a song. I twisted and flipped across the sea floor. Whenever I swim, the world above the water feels distant. I'm both entirely myself and someone else at the same time.



I visit my watery world in my head, too. Like at school, when I get picked last for kickball because everyone thinks I'm too slow. Or after my crush Jake called me "chubby" behind my back. Or when my teacher cut me the smallest piece of cake during a class birthday party.

As if they didn't think I'd notice.

The ocean lives in my mind, always there when I need an escape, when I need a reminder about who I really am.



One afternoon before vacation, Mommy takes me and Sage to the doctor for our yearly checkups. Dr. Teller has known Sage since Mommy adopted her, and me since I was a baby. But that doesn't mean I'm not scared of going to the doctor.

Two words: *the scale*.

Mommy says that I am growing. But lately I wonder if I've grown *too* much. And I wonder if Dr. Teller will notice.



While Dr. Teller examines my ears and eyes and takes my blood pressure, I pretend the hollow sound the ear device makes is water rushing around me. That the tightening around my arm is the ocean growing heavier, safer. "Your blood pressure is normal," she says. From the corner of the room, Mommy smiles.



I feel my legs begin to shake as Dr. Teller leads me over to the scale. There is a silence while she looks at the numbers. Her forehead crumples. "You are petite," she says. I don't mind being short; I'm the perfect height for hugs from Sage.

Then, Dr. Teller says, "However, I'm a little concerned about your weight."



I feel like something has suddenly pulled me to the surface, gasping for breath.

Mommy asks, "What do you mean?"

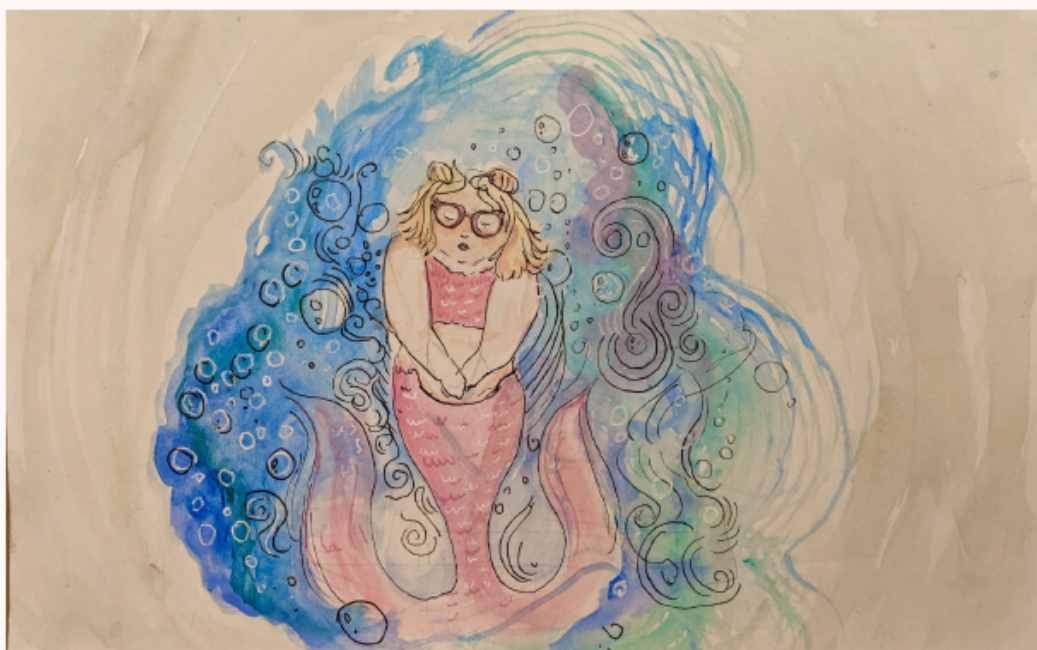
Dr. Teller replies, "Right now, she is overweight. It would be healthy if she could lose a few pounds before she starts fourth grade."

It's strange hearing Dr. Teller talk about me like I'm not there.



Dr. Teller's words pulse like blood in my ears over and over again.

I look down at my body, trying to imagine my mermaid tail sprouting, the sea pooling around me like a sanctuary.



Dr. Teller gives Mommy a pamphlet: *Snack Less, Move More: How to Help Your Child Lose Weight*. On it there is a picture of a kid with a fork. The only thing on their plate is broccoli and a slice of white chicken.

Mommy nods, scans the pamphlet, then stuffs it deep inside her purse.





Mommy and I sit back down in the waiting room while Sage goes in to see Dr. Teller. I wonder if Dr. Teller will say the same thing to Sage about her weight.



I look around the room at the other patients.

How did he get to be so big?

He needs to lose a few pounds.

Why does she look like that?

She's so disgusting.

Then I look down at myself.



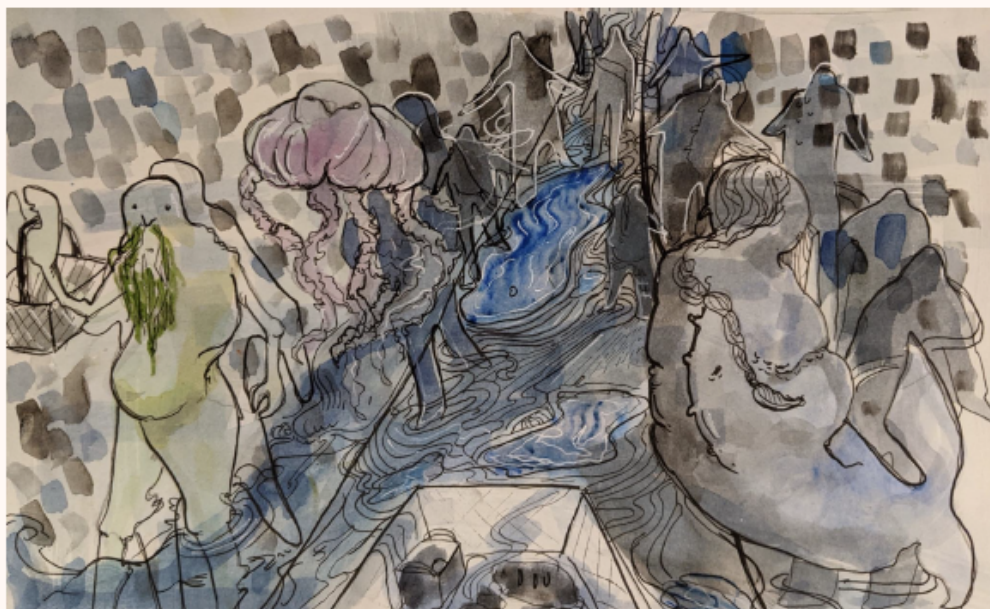
I've never felt so large yet so empty, like a fish tank with no life inside.



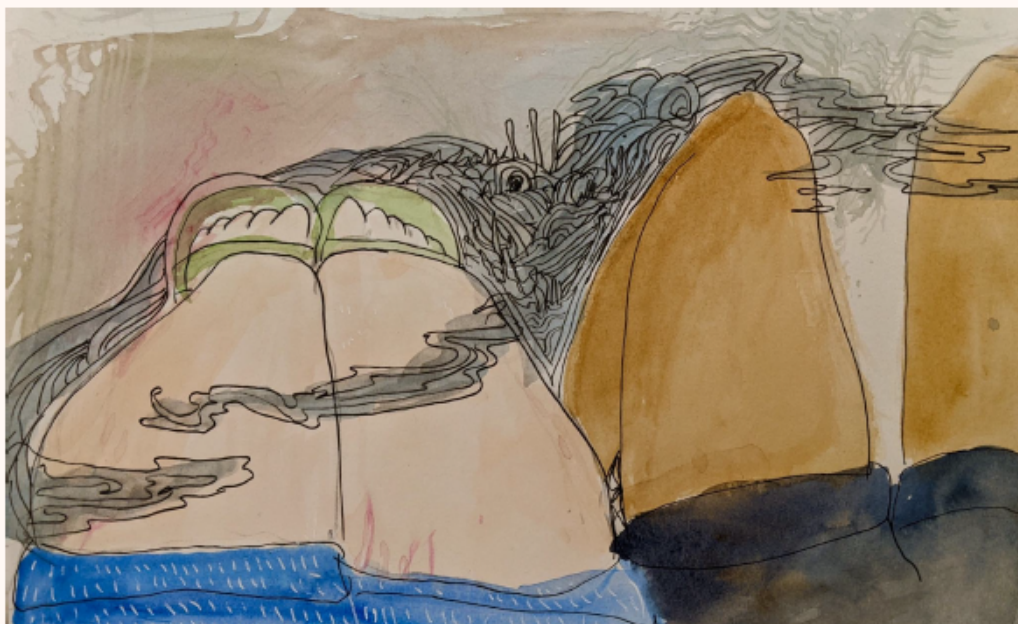
A few days later, we're getting ready to go down the shore. Mommy decides to take me and Sage food shopping so that we can buy snacks for the beach. We buy peaches and whole grain bread and bagel chips and American cheese.



But I can't stop looking at all of the bodies I see.
Whatever ocean this is, it is suffocating me.



It's so sweltering in the car during the drive down the shore that the backs of my knees start to sweat.
And for the first time, I notice my thighs are bigger than Sage's, even though Sage is older.



Maybe I'll just keep getting fatter and fatter until our car can't hold me anymore.



About an hour in, we pull into a rest stop. Mommy drives the car up to the gas pump – “Fill ‘er regular, please! Cash!” – and gives Sage and me her credit card so that we can get some lunch. In line for noodles, I am overwhelmed by smells and sounds. Salty steam from freshly-cooked soba, bubbling broths, and marinating vegetables envelop me like a perfect ocean. I am so hungry, and yet...



...a little voice in my head tells me I should not eat.



Finally, it is our turn to order. Sage orders shrimp pad thai. She asks me what I want.

I am so so so hungry, but no words come out.



Sage's eyes flash at me.

She orders a quart of pad thai, enough for us both.



On the walk back to the car, I feel like everyone is staring at me.
I wonder if they think I should snack less and move more.



In the backseat, I force myself to share Sage's pad thai, my stomach churning with every bite. I picture my whole body swelling. I picture a whale sucking in krill.

I wish that my hunger could stop.



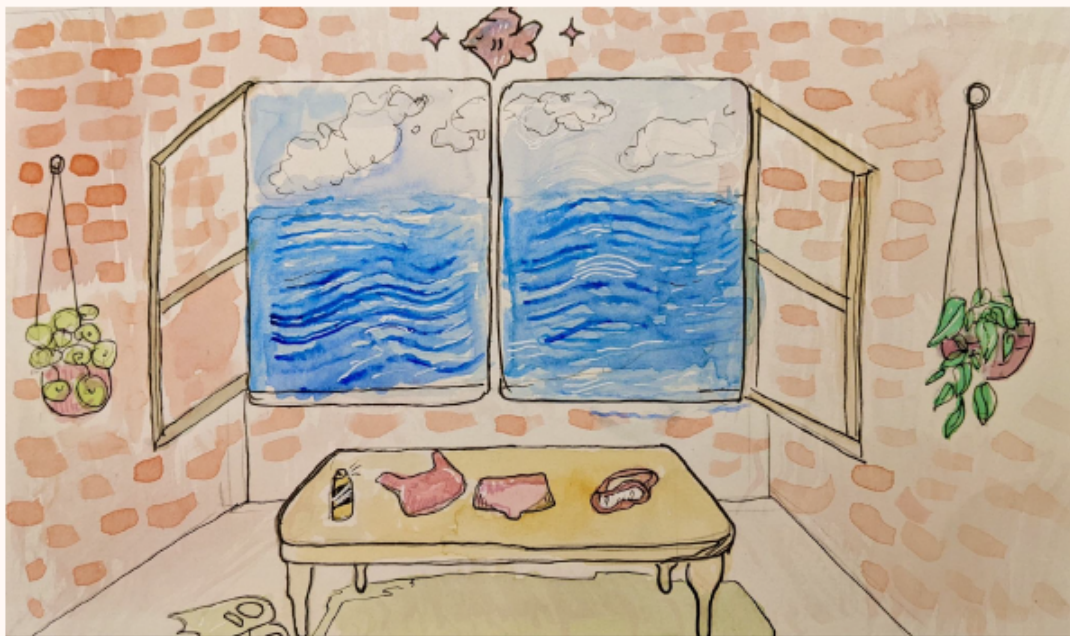
Being inside our condo, I mostly forget about my body for a while. Though there are moments when I suddenly remember, and it's like a wave swallowing me all at once. When Sage offers me some American cheese before lunch, I wonder if I should be snacking.

"You *need* to eat if you're hungry," Sage tells me. "You need to eat to *survive*."



The window from Mommy's bedroom looks towards the ocean, shimmering and alive as an open mouth.

We're going to the beach tomorrow morning. For the first time in my life, the thought of wearing a bathing suit makes me want to hide away forever.



We walk down the shady side of the street down to the beach. I'm happy because that means I don't have to stare at my shadow.

Mommy's carrying our chairs, Sage is carrying our towels, and I have the umbrella.

"You're so strong, Phoebe," Mommy says. "That umbrella is heavy."



The hot sand scalds the bottoms of my feet as we look for a spot to settle on the beach. Seagulls flit across the ground and the sky: preening themselves, searching for a bite to eat. The ocean comes in green-brown roars and blue-gray hills, moving like fabric underneath distant parasailers and tissue-paper clouds.



There are so many people around me that I start to feel sick. Three skinny girls around my age are standing near our umbrella. They remind me of the girls in my class.

Why don't I look like them?



But my thoughts are interrupted when Sage puts her arms around me. “Let’s play mermaids,” she says, and though I feel small in her arms, I feel my heart get larger and lighter. Sage and I hold hands all the way down to the edge of the water. I feel the damp warmth of Sage’s palm and the warmth from the bright, full wheel of the sun.



Then I start to look around: bathing suits squeezing skin, hair and marks and maybe even scales, and all sorts of monstrous limbs. And the feeling begins to ripple deep down again. *Why is that woman so...? What happened to her legs? How did his stomach get to be...? Why is her skin so...?*

...Do I look like that, too?



Sage starts to take a step into the water, but looks down at me first. "You look upset, Phoebe."
My face always gives me away. I tell her, "I can't stop thinking about how fat I am."
One thing about having an older sister is that they understand you exactly when they need to.



“Let’s show them how to become mermaids like us,” Sage says.



We slip into the ocean. My eyes sting for a moment, and then my underwater kingdom reveals itself. My tail sprouts, my throat opens. Colors swirl and fish dash and the sun shoots its laughter in pale lines beneath the surface.



Sage's body moves like a kite, her tail glimmering. A horseshoe crab floats by, then a school of shells. My tail is a current behind me, dotted with pink jewels and strung with threads of silver.

And underwater, people's legs look a little like mermaid tails, too.



We swim up for air.

“Do you think they saw us?” Sage asks me.

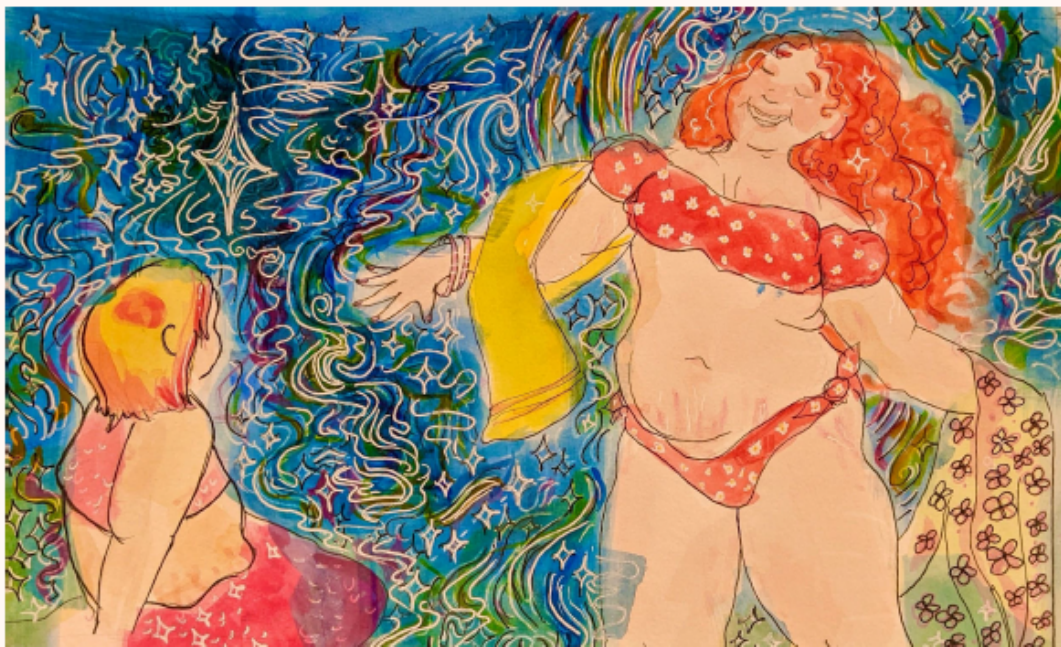
I think for a moment. “Maybe not,” I tell her, “but I saw *them*.”



I think of crabs and seahorses and big blue whales. I think of kelp and seals and redfish and oysters. I think of mermaids. I think of all the beauty of the sea, all the bodies in this world, and how without different shades and shapes, Earth would be nothing but a dull stone in space.



Sage and I swim for a while longer. When we're finished, we sprawl out on the wet sand, the water lapping our ankles at high tide. Nearby, a red-haired woman takes off her floral cardigan to reveal shining white arms.



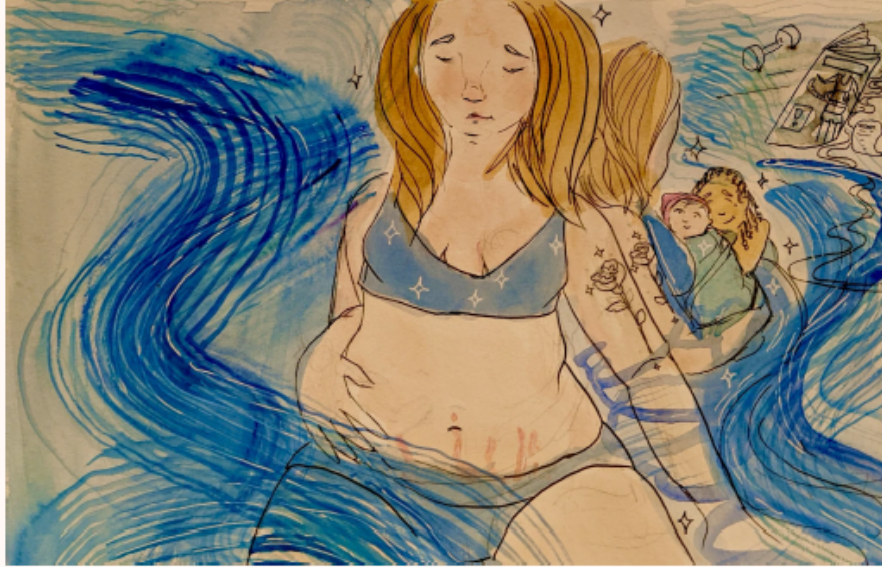
Two men lift up a little boy onto their shoulders with love in their eyes. A man and a woman lay on their towels, laughing and eating pizza bagels, filling their bellies without shame. A group of beautiful girls play volleyball. Everyone looks so happy, like their body is a kind of home for their joy.



Mommy comes over and sits next to us. After a silence, Sage says, “Phoebe, why are you worried about being fat?” I shrug. It’s hard for me to put into words how I feel when I’m at school, or when my clothes hug and clench my hips, or when Dr. Teller confirmed everything I’ve ever feared about who I am. So all I say is, “Because I’m unhealthy.”



Mommy and Sage look at each other. "Doctors aren't right about everything, Phoebe. It's best if you learn that now," Mommy says. "Did you know that after I gave birth to you, my doctor told me that I needed to lose weight? ...But I didn't want to lose the part of me that reminds me of when I carried you in my tummy." She points down at her stomach. She has the same silver lines around her belly button that I have on my legs. "I used to say awful things to myself every day, but now I've learned that voice isn't *really* mine."



Sage nods. "Once, a boy in my class had told me that I was built like a fridge. I had to cover up the mirror in my room for an entire week because I hated looking at my body."



Mom adds, "People have some really narrow ideas about how bodies are supposed to look. And sometimes, when you hate your body, you hate other people's bodies, too. But numbers can't tell the whole story of who you are. Your body is for *you*, Phoebe, and you only."



I look out at the reflection of the sun like a wavering gold stomach in the water. Around us, the pull of the ocean: glimmering and brilliant and full of the world.

“Okay, that’s good,” I say, turning around to Mommy and Sage. “I was worried that I’d need to eat only white chicken and broccoli forever.”

We all laugh.



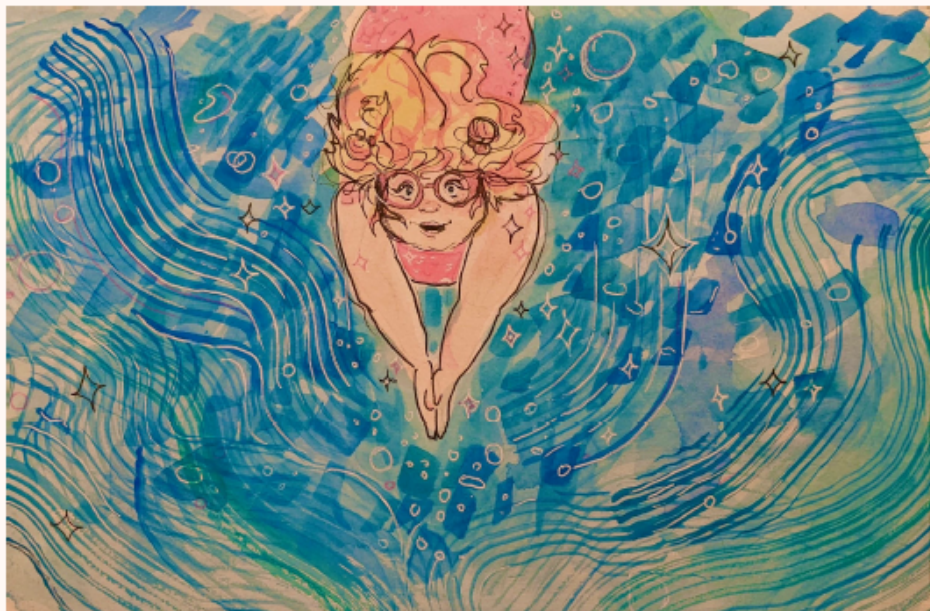
Sage and I hold hands and walk into the water again. Mommy walks through the trail we make behind us. The water sparkles like the eyes of a thousand people smiling. Then I see the red-haired woman floating over the waves as they bump up to the sky one after another. She is so at home, so at peace with her bigness, her vastness like a skyline. And for a moment, I wonder if she's really a mermaid. And then I wonder if I really am one, too, and not just in my head.



Maybe it will take a while for me to *really* feel like a mermaid.

Maybe some days I will need to be brave.

But now I know that sometimes, to see things more clearly, all you have to do is look at the world beneath the surface.



Appendix: Further Reading

Below is a list, split into categories, of literary and nonfiction texts for both children and school officials interested in literature featuring fat characters and/or educating themselves about body image and anti-fat bias.

Fiction Texts for Students Grades 3-5

Baron, C. (2021). *All of Me*. Square Fish.

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