

## SINCERITY FROM AMBIGUITY

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*Reflection, personal commitment, and the beauty of struggling with ambiguity is where real connections get made between people that raise them above the oppressor/oppressed scenario.*

Norman Kunc, as interviewed by Micheal Giangreco,  
reported in *The Stairs Don't Go Anywhere*

### Vexation

I'm perplexed, frightened, and slightly angry – perhaps experiencing vexation at its finest. I want to articulate my true, sincere self in my work. Yet I'm consistently experiencing ambiguity of purpose and identity, leading me to question my knowledge. As a result, I am acting from a position of fear and uncertainty, as if someone needs to give me permission to trust my ideas and instincts or apply to a higher authority to lead the life I have chosen. I am not the strong, confident leader I dreamt I had the capacity and the will to be. I am not the risk taker I imagined I would have the courage to become. I am in, but not part of, this academic world.

These feelings of alienation are difficult, particularly because I've always taken my work very seriously. Yet, this motivation is not fully intrinsic. In some deep, secret place, it is important to me that others see me as more than competent. I want others to think I do good work. I prefer to think of my teaching and research as my personal stamp and the best way I know of to make a difference in the world. I find myself wondering if that legacy is equal to, less than, or more important than the legacy I leave by being a good parent. No longer can my identity be completely described by my commitment to education. I am shocked and overwhelmed by the connection I feel to my daughter and have sought explanations for those feelings in biology. I am disappointed in the notion that an endocrine explanation is satisfactory, I want my humanity to be more than my biology. I believe that my discomfort with this tension is highly related to my venture, but an anecdote may provide the detail necessary to explore the relationship between my biology and my professional identity more fully.

I had a child in my first semester of faculty life. When I returned to work from maternity leave, I imagined writing something entitled "Petrified while Pumping". I thought I was ready to re-assume this new identity of assistant professor. I had talked myself into adopting the old adage of "fake it 'till you make it". I soon found myself wondering if I was faking it well enough. Four times a day, for twenty minutes each time, I would go through the oh-so-funny and please-don't-let-anyone-ever-see-me-doing-this process of hooking up body parts I had always been careful to keep private to a loud machine. Unable to balance a double pump and type on the keyboard or write by hand anything actually legible (because when I tried I would inevitably spill milk on my papers, computer, or clothes), I sat and ruminated. I thought of all the things I should be doing instead. I wondered, as Heidi Carlone so eloquently mentioned in her 2007 Crossroads paper, will it get me tenure? WHILE PUMPING! I thought of my daughter and how I missed her, how I hoped the sacrifice I felt I was making would only be worth it if I could truly affect change in other's lives. I feared I had made the wrong choice. I felt alone.

This new identity as a mother, coupled with the stress of worrying about tenure, contributes to this ambiguity of purpose and the fear of making a choice. I'm realizing that the dark, weighty cloud of tenure scares me because it seems to require, at its very core, approval of others. And this need for approval seems so grounded in doing work that is recognized as relevant and meaningful that I find myself spending more time worrying than doing. And is this really my identity? I sacrifice time from the one person I'm connected to in the most intimate of ways so that other people can stroke my ever so fragile ego? So that I can get permission to become one of those who can exert power over the untenured and reinvent this wheel? And how dare I say this out loud? How dare I critique or criticize the fundamental pillar of academic identity, the easily recognizable final seal of approval?

These vexations seem magnified by my interest in entering a new academic arena. My interests are growing at the intersection of science and "special" education. It is motivated by a hope that I can find a way for science to be taught better, to every single student (even the ones with labels of autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and behavioral or emotional disorders: the still missing and invisible kids in American schools). These students are the ones most marginalized and alienated. I feel deeply drawn to this work, particularly because I'm convinced that my personal feelings of confusion, loneliness, and isolation are experienced regularly and even more deeply by the students who are kept out of American classrooms because of their labels. And so, I work with new colleagues who challenge me to think and ACT in ways that I didn't seem ready for. They're

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encouraging advocacy and critique of the status quo. But this requires a courage that goes beyond my understandings of traditional scholarship and thus I feel that I'm continuing to make things up as I go along. My colleagues also challenge me to reject psychological and medical models for describing humans because they limit and fail to regard the full scope of our humanity, just as my own feelings as a new mother seem diminished and less complete when viewed solely from an endocrine perspective. And yet, I'm a *science* educator. How can I continue in this job and reject the outgrowths of the very content I'm trying to advocate for in elementary schools? And at the same time, how can I not participate in work that might help create the world I envision for my daughter and all children? Does becoming an advocate for disability require a full rejection of psychology and medicine? I don't think so; I know plenty of disability studies experts who still go to the doctor. But where is the line? What is the limit? Where does science fit in disability studies?

### Venture

I'm lost as to how to effectively represent my work in schools – it doesn't look like a lab report. My method of working with teachers emerges as I learn about them and their context. As I try to help them learn to value science by beginning to provide time for it in their days, I'm also asking them (only subtly thus far) to also open space for the children they have long rejected and ignored. I'm challenged as I work to negotiate my beliefs about teachers and their right to define their professional identity and what I believe about students and their fundamental right to an education. Thus far, when I've discussed inclusive science with teachers, they continue to think that the idea of "science for all" doesn't apply to "those" kids.

I want to work with teachers who will then open their doors to all students while viewing all of them as capable of learning science. I am planning an exploratory study that investigates the degree to which teachers who are attending regular, sustained professional development directed toward inclusive practice interpret that message in the context of science. The teachers I would like to study work in a low-performing urban school, beginning their third year in an intensive relationship with inclusive specialists who are helping them reform school structure and instruction (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). Through interviews of teachers and classroom observations, I'd like to document the teachers' perspectives about teaching science collaboratively with a colleague traditionally defined as a special educator. I'd like to listen to the way the teachers talk about their students while planning science lessons – are these teachers making the least dangerous assumptions about their students (Donnellan, 1984)? Are they viewing them as being competent (Biklen & Burke, 2006), particularly during science? If these perspectives are adopted, how are they helping the other students in the class?

I expect to find that science is being taught minimally in this school site. I see this as problematic, as I don't anticipate being able to identify best practices in science and inclusion together. I think I'll find a long list of what not to do. How do I deal with this? I hope to address the difficulties of this type of research – to what degree can I be critical of what I find? What are the political ramifications of these critiques, to the students, the teachers, the district, and me? I need to expand my understandings of methodology, while learning to negotiate the terrain where I can support teachers in maintaining their confidence and dignity while eliminating their own terrible practices that are damaging children. I need help with this.

Finally, I seek comment from the group regarding the utter absence of individuals with disabilities in the science education literature. Is this the case because these students are absent from classrooms? Thus, I'd like to hear thoughts about our roles as science educators in making this problem visible. This proposed work feels dangerous, yet I hope to communicate the urgent sincerity of my questions as genuinely as possible. It's appropriate that these questions are being explored at a Crossroads – it seems that is where I stand. There is an interplay and overlay of successive marginalization; I sit as a female, feeling excluded in a field traditionally led by the mainstream and by higher education tradition that infantilizes me, wanting to advocate for others who are marginalized through my work. Whew! Time is up – my daughter is crying.