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אפרתה

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נעמי שפירא

Engaging Children's Imaginations and Emotions in Learning

Kieran Egan

Introduction

Considering emotions and imagination in teaching inclines us to focus attention on aspects of ourselves, and learners, that we commonly neglect. Our emotions and our mind imaginations seem to have been with us from as early as we can remember, so we might usefully begin to consider their sources in our early bodily experience. Today, I will argue that only by attending much more closely to the kind of body we have and how it interacts with our mind will we be able to construct adequate notions of how to educate. I will focus particularly on the body's emotional responses and attachments, its musicality and humor, and also on bodily senses. I will explore how these features of our bodies, learned most intensively during our earliest years—though also educable throughout our lives—remain crucial for all future intellectual education. I will also explore how these features are closely implicated in the development of our imagination.

I will examine the toolkit that is available to us when we learn an oral language, and explore how intimately it is tied to the first toolkit that comes with our body. We will also explore the ways in which we might better educate children by observing how our body's "toolkit" continues to be important during later schooling. I will focus only on primary schooling, and consider how this perspective might change some long-held assumptions about how best to educate children in those early years.

Most educational theorizing and practice seems to be conducted as though humans were disembodied brains. While it is indeed the strange distinctiveness of our brain that is of great importance in education, it is also crucial to recognize that the brain is part of our body, and that the distinctive human body remains central to all forms of education. Today I will suggest that only by attending much more closely to the kind of body we have and how it interacts with our mind will we be able to construct adequate notions of how to educate.

I want to draw on Vygotsky's notion of how our intellectual growth occurs by our picking up an array of the cognitive tools that are available in our society and in the local human and natural environments with which we interact (see, e.g. Vygotsky, 1981, 1997; Wertsch, 1991, 1997).

Today, then, I want to explore some of the fundamental tools that are available to us as we grow up, with the kind of body we have, the forms of oral language we learn, and our early contacts with literacy in a modern society.

The body's toolkit

I will introduce this “toolkit” quite briefly, providing one or two paragraphs to elaborate on what I mean by each element of the “toolkit.” Thereafter we will explore how these tools persist as language develops and schooling commonly begins.

Senses: The inescapable elements of our body's toolkit are our senses—our sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, which we value more or less in that order. These senses are stimulated in our earliest years, and babies take a particular delight in games that engage a number of them: plops, clicks, and squeaks that create, then follow, patterns that involve hearing, sight, touch, and taste. Our senses are necessary for our initial understanding of the world and allow us to perceive and deal with a certain range and scale of the phenomena in our environments. Several theorists suggest that all of our later meaning-making actually emerges from this initial understanding by means of the body,

a point upon which I shall elaborate. Indeed, many of us do seem to have great difficulty later in life understanding things that are not an extension of these senses. For example, most of us can happily follow Einstein as he invites us along to ride on the back of a light-wave, but lose him sadly when it all dissolves into mathematical formulae and abstractions. Similarly, while we might scoff at the unlamented Taliban education minister of Afghanistan for ridiculing the notion that the sun is more than 90 million miles from the earth, because, as he reasonably pointed out, "There is no tape measure long enough to reach it!" we can feel some sympathy for a person who needs a way of measuring such distances based on familiar senses.

Emotions: A central feature of our body's meaning-making toolkit is its emotional nature. These emotions persist and develop as the most basic orientors and organizers of cognition throughout our lives; in other words, while emotions are essential to understanding by means of the body, they are clearly not specific to this type of understanding. The way in which we respond to the physical and social world around us depends, importantly, on our emotions: from an early age we experience profound emotional patterns such as expectation and frustration, or satisfaction, of the expectation.

Indeed the way we interpret events, including our later ability to critically analyze them, will always be shot through with emotions. Delight, distress, elation, horror, satisfaction, anger, compassion, and fear constitute elements of the underlying matrix that shapes our responses, and thus even rationality itself. David Kresch coined the neat term "perfinkers" (in Bruner, 1986, p. 69) to highlight the fact that we perceive, feel, and think at the same time. If we recognize the foundational development of our body's emotional core, we will be less likely to see cognition, and cognitive tools, as somehow separate from our emotional lives; however sophisticated our thinking becomes it will always be oriented and shaped by the emotions of the body within which it occurs. Damasio, who criticized so much of modern psychology for viewing the mind as some kind of epistemic engine of behavior, provides a powerfully suggestive image of human beings as creatures whose consciousness is driven by emotions. He distinguishes six universal emotions, namely happiness, sadness, fear, anger,

surprise, and disgust, which is the same group defined by Ekman, 1992. (See also deSousa on the rationality of the emotions, 1987).

Pattern and Musicality: Stephen Mithen's *The Singing Neanderthals* has helped to show how profoundly we are musical animals. Our musicality seems to be a central feature of our body's toolkit. Perhaps, as Mithen suggests, it originated early in our evolution as modern humans. We walk according to particular patterns that easily lead us to dance, and we sing, and sing together, in ways that are profoundly central to being human. Our bodies recognize, track, compose and respond to patterns in the physical world (including patterns of sound), that seem to have no particular utility, although our massive elaboration of those patterns is no doubt based on earlier forms that are tied to our survival. This peculiarity of our meaning-making seems to give humans in all cultures, and perhaps babies more than anyone, great aesthetic delight.

Rhythm and pattern are recognized in some form by all animals, but humans' sense of both is rich and quickly “bootstraps” into more complex forms that find expression through all our senses. We look for meaning in patterns from our earliest years, even when what we see, hear, or touch may be quite random. But we quickly recognize those recurring regularities that give us our most basic understanding of the world in which we find ourselves, and its significant patterns of sound, sight, touch, taste, and smell. We begin to construct that uniquely human kind of meaning based on the patterned regularities our senses deliver to us. There is, of course, a huge amount of recent research showing the importance of pattern recognition in infants' learning, in language learning and in the visual recognition of their world (see, for example, Kirchoff & Schimmel, 2005; and the multitude of studies from the Stanford University center for Infant studies: <http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~babylab/index.html>).

Humor: Another prominent component of our body's toolkit is humor, although, as with the earlier components discussed, humor is, of course, hardly limited to bodily meaning-making. While educators have typically neglected humor, or treated it as some relatively casual frill, the presence of humor in our earliest interactions suggests that its stimulation and development might be profoundly

important, and consequently it should be considered as a constituent of any adequate program of education. It is useful to remember that humor, in many of its forms, is based on incongruity. The intentional interruption of any normal pattern of activity—even if that pattern has just been created for a game—can stimulate a humorous response, as can unintentional interruptions of normal patterns, of course, as the proverbial banana skin can testify. The interruption conditions the baby to incongruity. Ability to deal easily and pleasurably with incongruity contributes to flexibility of mind. Humor is important for many reasons, not least the delight it can impart to experience, but it has distinctive educational importance in its contribution to flexible, imaginative, and creative thinking.

Our physical sense of humor becomes evident in such early activities as the mutual sticking out of tongues, tickling, the hiding and revealing of peek-a-boo, and other forms of pretend that so delight babies and elicit laughter. All our behaviors seem accessible to a sense of humor, both to enrich the experience itself and to recognize it as part of contexts that we can also transcend. That is, even in those peek-a-boo games, we engage in a form of behavior while recognizing that the overt behavior is only a part of what is going on. Of course, babies cannot express this, but their positive response and their grasping of the “rules” of such play indicates clear understanding. The fuller meaning, as Mithen suggests, may lie in the fostering of affection and communication; what is happening, again, is only a part of what is happening.

There is a range of research now available showing a number of dimensions of learning that are aided by humor (for a good summary of this material, and further support, see Garner, 2005; see also Garner, 2006).

Mimetic Intentionality: Merlin Donald (1991) argues that mimesis, intentionally invented representation, is central to early forms of human learning behavior. While numerous other species mimic (or even according to Donald's categorization, imitate) the physical movements and sounds of other individuals in their community, it is only humans that seem able to combine such gestures or sounds in novel ways, or indeed to invent new gestures derived from known

ones. For example, a young child might cover her face and bow her head to indicate grief; such types of gestures, involving “a representational dimension to imitation” (p. 169), are not performed by apes and other animals, even though one does see such conventional responses to emotions in our ape family (see Call & Tomasello, 2007). We use our body while interpreting the gestures of others, of course, as well as in inventing novel gestures for communicative purposes. Such types of interactions, Donald argues, “interlock the infant's growing mind with those of its caretakers and ultimately the broader society” (p. 255). Attachment of infants to caregivers is one of the most studied topics in psychology, from Bowlby's landmark work, (1969) to recent discussions of the range of modern research, (e.g. Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

If you are sitting with a one-year-old and a cat and you point at the door, the toddler will usually look at the door and the cat will look at your finger. The toddler will also point, something a cat, or a chimpanzee, will not do. We very early develop the power to read the intentions of others in their actions and we anticipate their reading of our intentions in our actions. We represent the world in our mind, and relate to the external world composed in the mind, in a way that is unique in the animal world.

* * *

In the following section, I will discuss how the body's toolkit influences the development of the toolkit that comes along with an oral language. Although I could go on to explore how the body's toolkit influences the toolkits that accompany literacy and theoretic thinking, my immediate purpose is to demonstrate the importance of recognizing the bodily bases of our later cognition, in some fairly simple and explicit ways not much attended to in primary (or later) education, and therefore it will be enough at present to connect the previous set of tools with a related set that comes with development of an oral language.

The toolkit of oral language includes elements such as story structuring and recognition, metaphors, abstract binary opposites, rhyme, meter, and pattern,

jokes and humor, forming images from words, and the sense of mystery. I will describe each of them, indicate why they are reasonably considered to be significant components of the toolkit of oral language, and show how they are in turn shaped by the body's toolkit.

All these categories are attempts to identify features of our developmental profile that are not much explored either in psychology or education. The kind of category I am trying to bring into focus seems better suited for educational purposes than those that are more familiar from psychological theories, whose extrapolation to education seems to me to nearly always have been unsuccessful. This is not an argument to pursue here, but is simply an attempt to account for the unusual features of our main "tools." The complexity of human development is such that these crude and general categories are inevitably imprecise, so it would be a mistake to assume that each of the previous tools will morph in some direct way into the tools I will explore in this section. Indeed, these are fairly general categories, and not very well sorted into a coherent set; story, metaphor, and binary opposites, for example, may seem to be at different "levels" or, at least, are not, apparently, items of the same set. So we should not expect any simple and direct movement from, say, our senses to our use of metaphors, even though I will suggest that there are important connections. Even in the case of bodily humor and oral jokes, the connections are far from simple, and bodily humor slops over in such a way that bits could be picked up by other oral language tools, such as rhyme, or stories. While we would be wise to remember that there is nothing simple or straightforward about the way these few categories try to capture some features of the enormous complexity of human development, I will try to clarify, as simply and straightforwardly as possible, these admittedly messy connections.

The toolkit of oral language

At the very simplest level of language development we can see the strong constraints the body places on language. The unique physiology of our speech organs gives us remarkably more sound options than those exhibited by our

primate cousins. We suck air into our lungs and gradually let it seep out and become shaped by the pharynx, the larynx, and tongue to make those commonly accepted sounds that form the basis of human language. We could say that, at least to some extent, our thoughts are shaped by the amount of air we can pull into and emit from our lungs in one go: generally, this constrains our expression into clauses and sentences. Stephen Pinker (1994) called the sentence a case of syntax overriding carbon dioxide, though we might more appropriately see the limits of the sentence as carbon dioxide's triumphant determination of syntax.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) (and Johnson, 2007) argue that language itself evolves from our bodily experience of phenomena and that bodily-based metaphors pervade our understanding of many of the world's most fundamental physical forces and operations. These body-based metaphors provide “a pervasive principle of human understanding that underlies our vast network of interrelated literal meanings” (Johnson, 1987, p. 65.) For example, such simple concepts as up and down may indeed be based in our bodily experiences of the world, so that positive emotions, (such as happiness) and increases in quantity (such as more) go up and negative emotions (such as sadness) and decreases in quantity (such as less) go down. We subconsciously continue complex orientation and meaning in language from the orientation to the world first established by our bodies in our use of such bodily-based metaphors as “in,” “out,” “force,” “balance,” and so on. These basic concepts, while grasped by individuals in slightly different ways as a result of our particular bodily experience and our emotional responses to that experience, are, of course, somewhat culturally bound, but generally shared and understood by everyone.

Besides the direct ways in which the physical world and our own bodies shape the particular sounds we can make and the words we “choose,” there are other ways in which our bodies shape the understanding we acquire with oral language. For example, we might say that the bodily constraints that shape the sentence also give us the story as the sentence writ large. The relationship between those rituals of expectation and satisfaction the baby experiences from the beginning, such as hunger and feeding, or hunger and not being fed sufficiently quickly, which leads to frustration followed by satisfaction, and

the thousand variations we all know from our earliest experience, can be seen when language develops in the plots of stories. We set up expectations in stories, complicate them, and then satisfy them, or fail to satisfy them in more complicated plots. So these bodily patterns of our emotional lives are evident in the shapes of our later stories.

It is not too difficult to see clear parallels between the structure of sentences and that of stories. The rules that bind sentences (grammar) create syntax; the rules that bind stories (verisimilitude, etc.) create plot. Or we could say that as morpheme is to syntax, so event is to plot. (For further examples of the more subtle ways in which sentences, shaped by bodily constraints, are analogous to the structure and composition of stories, which also bear the more distant marks of our bodies, see Egan, 1978).

Understanding based on the mediation of binary opposites, as is evident in the meaning-making that comes with oral language, also seems to be a development of the kinds of mediation that we employ as part of bodily knowing. As babies, the events of our days are experienced in terms of bodily senses of security and anxiety, pleasure and pain, expectation and satisfaction, happiness and sadness, and so on. We oscillate from pole to pole, rarely settling for long in the mediating condition between the two opposites. Such binary oppositions provide the basic structure for children's stories, such as *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Jack the Giant Killer*. These fairy tales are all structured on powerful, abstract, binary oppositions such as security and anxiety, pleasure and pain, expectation and satisfaction, happiness and sadness, and so on. Bettelheim analyses the "manner in which [children] can bring some order into [their] world by dividing everything into opposites" (1976, p. 74; see also Propp, 1985; Zipes, 1991). The body, then, provides a template on which our understanding of stories is directly structured.

Similarly, the rhymes, meter, and pattern of language are straightforwardly structured on the patterns and rhythms established by our bodily awareness of the world, and also on the patterns and rhythms of our physical wants and needs. When we are pre-linguistic, we gain a sense of the world that involves

regularities and patterns of seemingly infinite kinds. These absorb and are absorbed into our languaged perception of the world, so that new tools such as rhyme in language, pattern in numbers, and deliberate shapes and lines in art are built on the meaning-making patterning of our earliest bodily experience, and can provide the same delight. The fundamental musicality of our physical make-up leads to our shaping sound into shared patterns of language and then shaping language to give pleasure as well as to communicate meaning, and sometimes to do both simultaneously.

In much the same way as physical rhythm transforms into our languaged, rhythmized sense of the world, so too do our earliest bodily games and humor give birth to jokes; the physical fun of peek-a-boo becomes the fun of the concocted language of riddles, puns and other forms of jokes. Maybe you heard about the boy who fell into the sea and thrashed around shouting: “I can't swim! I can't swim!” A girl stood looking at him from the shore: “So what? I can't play the violin, but I don't go shouting about it.” Or perhaps you know when cooks are mean? “When they beats eggs and whip cream.” Jokes such as these, which typically delight young children, rely greatly on incongruity. The incongruity that is crucial to the humor of infancy (with a person disappearing and magically appearing again in a new location) now finds a role in jokes that rely on deliberate misunderstanding, or perhaps misuse, of language (Klein, 2003). Both in the physical and oral form, familiarity with and use of such incongruity helps develop flexibility and creativity of mind, a capacity that can be furthered enormously by language. (The kind of joke that gives greatest delight changes as we grow older and more particularly as we pick up further toolkits of understanding—so don't try playing peek-a-boo with a 45 year old on the bus).

Like humor, the array of images available to our minds, while somewhat limited in our early years, is enriched immensely by the acquisition of language. We seem unable to not form images when we hear events described in words, and the effects of stories depend, to a great extent, upon listeners' ability to form images in their minds. We can, of course, treat vivid descriptions as though they are abstract terms, and resist creating images while listening, but it certainly requires effort.

Normally images are brought into the mind seemingly effortlessly. The ability to call up precise and rich images is a unique feature of our mind and is clearly connected to the development of imagination. It is also pervasive; most adults can still call up images from stories they heard as young children, and, indeed, their early memory is made up largely of images (Cowan, 1998).

We could examine more ways in which our early bodily experience provides templates for our later languaged experience, but the above should suffice for the purpose of the next section, in which we will consider some of the implications that such a way of thinking about our earliest tools of meaning-making can have on primary education.

Some implications for primary education

I have explored some features of our bodies' toolkit that are important to our future intellectual activity. I then explored how those bodily tools morph gradually with language and “inhabit” important intellectual activities. Too often we see the languaged form and forget the somatic base from which it has grown, and we also forget the somatic features that remain within the languaged form. Now I will examine how recognition of the fundamental meaning-making nature of these somatically shaped language tools can lead us to view early education in a new light. My purpose is not to argue the commonly accepted principle that young children's senses should be actively involved in learning. This has been a prominent feature of progressivism for more than a century, and has been explicitly argued back to Pestalozzi and Rousseau. Rather, my aim is to point out that features of what we usually consider straightforward intellectual activities—stories, binary opposites, images, etc.—are intimately tied to their somatic sources in ways that are rarely acknowledged. Recognizing these somatic sources leads us to think about some aspects of primary education differently from what is currently considered normal. It is those differences I want to explore and emphasize here.

The story is a fundamental tool for engaging our emotions in establishing meaning, having grown from those patterns of emotion laid down in our

infancy. By “story” we do not mean simply the “once upon a time” kind of story but also the kind we are interested in when a girl asks a friend, “What’s the story on your new neighbors?” In the latter case, she is not asking the friend to make up a fiction; she is asking for the facts in a way that highlights their importance and emotional impact. This is the kind of “story” we read all the time in newspapers or hear on TV. We don’t expect friends to make things up or the reporter to invent fictions, but rather to bring us the facts about neighbors and news items in a format that enhances our understanding. This sense of the story has greater importance for primary education than is commonly recognized. Instead of pondering our objectives for a new unit, we might better ask first, “What’s the story on this?” That is, we begin to organize lessons and units of study by first considering their emotional importance and how this can be brought out clearly to enhance students’ understanding, through the use of the cognitive tool that is most capable of engaging their imaginations. As Ohler puts it: “I have come to appreciate that quite often when students say, ‘This is too hard’ or ‘This doesn’t make sense,’ what they’re really saying is ‘Where’s the story?’” (2007, p. 118).

There are many texts that promote the importance of stories in children’s education. My point is quite different, however. I believe that students’ imaginations will be routinely engaged in lessons if they are “story-shaped.” Take, for example, the common topic of the butterfly. The story of the butterfly is one of dramatic extremes: from being constrained, to great freedom and constant movement; from being a rather featureless, ugly creature, to one of the most beautiful; from being a voracious eater to eating almost nothing; from being monochrome to dazzling colors. The butterfly has one of the most dramatic transformations in the animal world. Therefore our lesson will need to work out how to tell this story in all its dramatic extremes. Teachers considering how this might best be done can draw upon the bodily understanding from which the story structure emerges; and, of course, they will engage the students’ senses in the process. What expectations can we set up and then later fulfill for students in their experience of the “story” of butterflies? What activities can they engage in to help them to understand these physical extremes?

Generating images from words is another powerful cognitive tool that originates in somatic experience and develops in new ways with oral language. Its immense utility was discovered long ago in the creation of shared images and feelings about who “we”—our family, tribe, or nation—are, what we are doing here, and what we are supposed to do in the time we are here. In tandem with the story, this tool provides the conceptual glue that binds societies together and generates their sense of solidarity and identity. Nearly everyone learns a story about their country's founding and identity, and they learn a set of images, with appropriate emotional responses that support the story. (Whether these images are appropriate or otherwise has major educational importance, of course, but my point here is simply how meaning-making requires the development of this tool in children, and too little thought is given in teacher education programs to helping children shape images).

Given the range of social and psychological functions this image-forming tool allows us to perform, it is clearly something we can use in educating and a tool we need, in turn, to educate. That is, when teaching mathematics, science, or history, we need to attend to the images that can make the concepts and knowledge engaging and vivid. We would also be wise to consider the conditions, apart from frequent use, that will stimulate increasing flexibility and sophistication in the use of this tool. You may scan educational textbooks till your brain crumbles and yet you will find hardly any mention of image generation from words, and no discussion of how teachers can stimulate and develop it.

Today, as a rule, not only do we ignore this cognitive tool; we almost seem intent on suppressing it. Electronic media such as TV, movies, video games and the internet, can be great enemies of this tool's development, as they constantly provide images and so undermine our capacity to generate our own unique images from words. Rather than foster our ability to create vivid, emotionally resonant images on our own, the images we are bombarded with may encourage the easy acceptance of stereotypical, often emotionally barren, images. Similarly, giving children storybooks full of illustrations may not be as beneficial as telling them oral stories and allowing them to generate their own

rich images in response (which, of course, has been the condition of listeners to oral stories for countless generations, all the way back to the dim beginnings of our history as cultural animals). Today many children never hear a story. They tend to watch movies, or TV, or, at best, have a story read to them while they look at the pictures. Given that many children suffer impoverishment of this tool from the outset, and given its importance in the development of imagination, we should want to foster it in our primary educational program. (I am not recommending an either/or choice here; some TV and some well-illustrated books can also be beneficial. My purpose is to draw attention to what is commonly neglected and of considerable importance in the development of our ability to generate mental images).

When we begin planning a lesson or unit, then, it might be helpful for teachers to ask, “What emotionally charged images are central to this topic?” The image can communicate a level of meaning with force and clarity in a way that also engages the student's imagination. When teaching about the properties of the air, for example, we can focus on how to represent to the students the fact that the “story” here is that the air they think of as empty is really full of the most amazing and varied things—radio waves, particles from the sun, dust (decayed human skin, and even decayed fly feces), pollen, and on and on. This emotionally charged image is not built just by showing students pictures of enlarged pollen, viruses or bacteria, but rather by achieving a vivid sense that the air is crowded with more things than we can guess at—in contrast to those things we do see and touch when we enter a room, which the students come to realize are relatively dull and uniform. By using vivid descriptions, telling stories, and asking children to play with their imaginations while considering the properties of air—for example by imagining various entities as characters—students can create a repertoire of emotionally powerful images for the unit of study.

Let us consider some more cognitive tools, which are connected both to each other and to the story. These are children's recognition and orientation to new knowledge via binary opposites, and also their constant use of abstract ideas. We put them together because they seem to run counter to current beliefs about young children's thinking and learning.

Think of Grimm's fairy tales, which have equivalents in many cultures. Each story has a simple structural element just below its surface: emotionally charged binary opposites – like courage/cowardice, security/fear, love/hate, good/bad – give shape and provide access to the meaning of the events (Fisher, 1996). The story of *Hansel and Gretel* would be just one thing after another if it weren't carefully structured to attach our emotions of security and fear to the sequence of events. The story plays with those emotions and their interactions and conflicts. How frightening that the children are hungry and lost in the forest; what a relief that they find an edible cottage and are invited in; how frightening that the wicked witch . . . etc. In educational settings, we will want to abstract this feature of binary structures to use in teaching algebra, history, or whatever.

It has long bewildered me that part of the folklore of educators at present is that young children are “concrete” thinkers. Clearly this idea captures something about the way young children's thinking differs from that of adults; but it is generally taken to mean that young children therefore cannot understand abstractions, among other intellectual deficiencies under which they are presumed to labor. The trouble with such folk-lorish beliefs is that they tend to prevent those who hold them from seeing children except through those beliefs. But consider the foundations of those Grimm's fairy stories – security/fear, courage/cowardice, good/bad: have you ever learned more abstract ideas? Think also of the characters – they are not people in any rounded sense but representatives of beauty, simplicity, greed, terror, goodness, and so on. That is, it's not just the underlying structure of the story that rides on abstractions but the characters as well, and, of course, those abstractions are derived from earlier or present somatic experience.

Young children usually do not explicitly identify theoretic abstractions, but their thinking is constantly suffused with abstractions. Indeed it seems to make better sense to claim that young children make sense of the “concrete” when it is tied to underlying abstractions, than that they are “concrete” thinkers. It is the emotionally charged abstractions—love, hate, fear, security, anxiety, good, bad—that are more profoundly known and pervasively used in their thinking. Our educational program, then, will be sure to draw on, stimulate,

and elaborate on children's use of abstractions. These emotionally-charged abstractions are clearly another cognitive tool we will sensibly try to develop and use in curriculum selection and delivery.

Grimm's fairy tales, children's games, and most of what engages young children's imagination are built on abstract, emotionally-charged binary opposites. And if early schooling is to introduce children to the great stories and games of our culture—our history, science, mathematics, literature, and so on—it would surely be unwise to ignore the structural features we can see in those areas of their spontaneous engagement. Again, it might take some ingenuity to present mathematics and history in such terms, while ensuring they do not falsify what we want to teach. But only a little ingenuity is required and the rewards in terms of children's understanding can be enormous.

As they gain experience, children learn to mediate between the opposites that provide their first grappling tools for knowledge. We each learn to build a conceptual world between extremes—between the ideally good and bad, the totally secure and dangerous, the infinitely courageous and cowardly. Education becomes a process of elaborating on that conceptual middle world to more adequately reflect in language the world we experience. But our adult recognition that the binary terms we begin with are not adequate representations of the complex reality should not cause us either to fail to recognize or deny their utility in the earliest attempts to grapple with areas of knowledge.

It might seem odd to propose that the educational value of humor is one of our most fundamental meaning-making tools, derived from our earliest interactions with caregivers, and that it plays an important role both in establishing our social being and easing relationships with others. But our common understanding of its educational application seems restricted to it being simply a personality trait of some teachers who might use it to motivate students to learn. Little is said about its much more profound and important contribution to our developing understanding, for example in developing a richer grasp of language itself. Humor should not be seen as an educational incidental, but as an important tool of our meaning-making that should be a focus of our educational efforts—we

should help students develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of humor and its possibilities.

The purpose of using jokes in teaching is to point out something that is blindingly obvious—young children enjoy a certain kind of joke, and humor is an important part of their lives, unless suppressed by adults for one crazy reason or another. Indeed, this observation seems to have generally eluded educators—at least, as evidenced by shelf-loads of educational textbooks that never mention it.

Most of the jokes young children enjoy play with language in such a way that, to get the joke, you have to recognize the language game being played; you have to see language as an object on which you can reflect and which you can manipulate. Language, very much a human behavior, is one of these odd shared behaviors that make culture possible. Becoming conscious of it, and being able to reflect on it, are prerequisites for developing increasingly flexible use of language, which in turn is a prerequisite for a huge range of cultural attainments. Developing what is sometimes called “metalinguistic awareness,” which involves seeing language as an object and not just a behavior, is clearly tied to the later development of a wide range of literacy skills and to enriched flexibility in language use in early childhood (Donaldson, 1968; Kummerling-Meibaue, 1999). So I recommend introducing a period in our school day for jokes, in which students would be encouraged to tell jokes, and instructed in inventing their own in small groups. Such activities would add significantly to their ability to shape narratives, use language more effectively, and a range of other important linguistic skills (Garner, 2006, 2006). It might also make school considerably more fun. Because it is a tool that enables us to enlarge our understanding and pleasure in life, and because these are worthy educational goals, humor will be a consistent part of the educational program towards which we might sensibly work.

Conclusion

By attending to the toolkit for meaning-making that comes along with the kind of body we have, and then observing how that toolkit blends into, and is changed by, the toolkit that accompanies oral language, we have been led to a set of principles for primary education that are significantly unlike those that dominate our schools today. This approach inclines us to see primary school children as engaged by abstract, emotionally-charged ideas, especially when they are composed into story structure, and as using and benefiting from the educational application of binary opposites, the generation of images, humor and mystery. (Many more elaborate examples of using such tools in designing lessons and units for everyday teaching can be found at <http://ierg.ca/teacher-resources/lesson-and-unit-plans/> and in Egan, 2005).

Teachers are usually attentive to engaging students' senses in learning—something that John Dewey continually emphasized. My concern, however, is somewhat different and perhaps less straightforward. That is, much of what we consider conceptual activity in our students is tied in unexpected ways to their bodily experience. Attending to their bodily bases elicits principles of learning that seem inadequately recognized and practiced. Recognition of the emotional forces at play in stories, for example, leads us to re-think how to plan lessons and units in a manner that brings out the story in our topics, rather than focusing exclusively on objectives; recognizing the role of image forming leads us to pay more attention to locating the affective images in our topics, rather than attending largely to content and concepts; recognizing the importance of binary abstractions in children's ability to grasp new knowledge opens up new possibilities for teaching a wide range of topics; and recognizing the role of humor in adequate language development could transform the tone of classrooms and the experience of school for children.

These are just a few of the principles for early education that follow from taking our body and its role in intellectual education more seriously. A simple initial trawl, trying to make connections apparent and relatively easy to see, leads us to an unfamiliar world of primary education. In my view, it is also a

world that makes much more sense than the experiences children so commonly receive today.

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