

A Classroom Full of Embodied Beings: An Anthropological Discussion  
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In a room full of desks and chairs, carefully aligned, twenty second graders sit with their feet on the ground and hands carefully folded. It's time for the daily math lesson, and the students watch their teacher write simple problems on the board for them to copy. The lesson continues for ten minutes; a few students squirm, some slide a leg up underneath them, others rest their heads in their hands. Before moving on to the next problem, the teacher corrects the students: "Feet on the ground and hands folded, please! It will help us pay attention." The children sigh and force themselves back into the prescribed position.

But not all hope is lost. Recess is soon, where the students can release the pent-up tension, getting all the "squirms" out in order to pay attention even more closely to the afternoon lessons.

This portrait of a day in the typical American classroom is divided: class time for the mind, recess for the body. But what if mind and body interact more closely than our American education system allows? Perhaps the development of the modern classroom—perfect rows of desks, with students sitting still—stems from a misunderstanding of embodiment.

### Defining Embodiment

Recently, popular literature has surfaced on the need to "create movement in the classroom." In a spring 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, educators call for this reform, yet it is often encouraging a reductionist view of the child—as bodies that merely contain the mind rather than participate with it.<sup>1</sup> The reality is that movement is not only important to learning, it is essential to learning. And it is not just essential; it is, in a word, a part of our essence. True embodiment is not merely the dualistic view of requiring "brain breaks" (i.e., movement for the body so the brain can rest and rejuvenate); nor is it merely a naturalist view of connecting the mind with the earth in an effort of concentration; nor is it reducing children to behavioral beings that need "recess" to build socio-emotional ties.

Some discuss embodiment as associated primarily with habits. Yet some of the habits we are demanding of young children are in contrast to their embodied reality: they lack the developmental progress needed. A 6-year-old can perform the "habit" of speaking kind words, because he can speak, and understands the concept of "kind." This practice will help develop a habit of virtue that we desire in the child. Habits of skills are also formed by practice and require initial attentiveness. But for the immature *developing* child, the practice needs to consist of a skill they are capable of. No matter how often a 6-year-old practices driving a car, the success of developing good driving habits is limited. No matter how often a 4-year-old practices sitting quietly in a chair, the success of developing quiet sitting habits for a full day is limited. This "habit" demands a physical capacity of the child, not a character trait, or virtue, or Aristotelian *habitus* we hope to encourage in the child. Herein lies our misunderstanding. Sitting still is not a skill hardwired into children and brought forward by repetition, nor is it the product of conscious thought training a wayward body. It is the product of rich, experience-filled time in a developing body. Yes, time.

James K. A. Smith, a philosopher at Calvin College, has explored the idea of embodiment in two of his recent books, *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom*. Smith recognizes the difference between body-as-commodity and body-as-self: "My body is not something I have, but something I am; it is the "me" that dwells in the world."<sup>2</sup> This small difference in our

assumptions about our bodies has a significant impact on our assumptions about education. Smith, in agreement with classical educators, insists on a holistic education, recognizing the body as part of the whole: “On this account [of embodiment], education is not something that traffics primarily in abstract, disembodied ideas; rather, education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desire, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world.”<sup>3</sup>

True embodiment is based in a creational reality. The Hebrews defined man as a complete being, loving the Lord with all heart, soul, and might, or in other words, with all their soul-filled being. The New Testament reminds us to love with Lord with all heart, soul, mind, and strength. Written to a philosophy-infused Greek audience, the idea of *might* is separated into the two entities of *mind* and *strength*, to convey to the dualistic Greek the totality of man.<sup>4</sup> “Plato, Socrates, and many other classical thinkers saw the body as an unfortunate fleshly tomb that carries the real important thing—our soul”, states Rod Gilbert, Headmaster of Regents School of Austin.<sup>5</sup> “I reject this erroneous classical view with militant zeal. The human body is a lovely, complex part of the essence of being a human being.”

### **Embodied Development**

Human beings do not arrive in maturity. They arrive in a lovely, complex and immature package that needs time for development. The original use of the term ‘development’ meant to unwrap something that was concealed, or de-envelop it. As Christians we believe what is revealed is present from the beginning—in short, what is revealed is what was created. We are blessed to live in a time when science continues to uncover what previous generations could hardly imagine, from supernovas to DNA. Not only are we composed of tiny subatomic particles difficult to envision, but we also exist in a universe that expands beyond our comprehension.<sup>6</sup> And in a tiny first cell lies the blueprint for one embodied immortal.

It is exciting, as one whose interest is human development along with classical education, that the current theory of development is termed “embodied cognition”. We are beginning to scientifically understand the wholeness of man, and what it means to the growth and intellect of our children. What is our theoretical framework for development? We, of course, all have one, whether it is conscious or unconscious. How do we humans learn to crawl, walk, reach, talk, and retain ideas? Does it just happen serendipitously in each environment? Is our primary job as parents and schools to fill their brains with concepts and ideas as their bodies haphazardly grow and move toward maturity? Our notions about how children develop “can deepen our understanding of children, but it can also distort and limit our view.”<sup>7</sup>

Cartesian dualism has left an impact on our Western world, even if it may not be the impact Descartes intended. We have driven the mind and body apart to consider use of them independently and to examine them independently. As Christians, we recognize that scientific reductionism cannot easily explain the world God has created or the actions of man. In an age of fMRI mapping of brain activity, the possibility of explaining experiences has given way to an explosion of countless systems involved in one experience.<sup>8</sup> The brain “lighting up” is a representation of a relationship between increased brain blood flow and an activity, not necessarily a solitary cause/effect relationship. The more we find out about the brain and body, the more complex it becomes, preventing a simple mapping of brain-body control or thought-action processes.

In the past 50 years, it has been common to consider the computer as a model for the human brain. By using language such as “control center” and “information processor”, we were

assuming the brain took the sensory information that was perceived and created a conclusion and command for the actions of our body. Cognition was studied as a process that happened independent of the body or the environment. However, the current understanding of child development is guided by the principles of dynamic systems theory. ‘Dynamic’ in that there is an ever-changing flow of relationship between us and the world around us. ‘Systems’ in that it involves all of the systems in our human makeup: visual, auditory, cardiovascular, vestibular (equilibrium), digestive, muscular, and brain, to mention a few, and that each system dynamically interacts with others at the same time. This fluid interaction with the environment, especially for a child, is often dependent upon movement through that environment. Specifically, *self-movement* changes the relationship of a person to their environment and is consequently the ‘supporting framework’ for further knowledge of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Esther Thelen, leading dynamic systems theorist and developmental psychologist, states, “To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world.”<sup>10</sup> This movement-perception-cognition idea is foundational to our understanding of the current theory of ‘embodied cognition’. In an amazing design, babies have intrinsic abilities to suck, grasp, see, and kick from birth. As they suck and breathe in rhythm, they develop core musculature. As they lift their heads, look around and roll across the floor they develop trunk muscles and sensory knowledge to support sitting and refine sounds for phonation. As they scoot forward on the floor, coordination of a constantly changing visual scene with their own movement develops the understanding of depth, space, and their individuality. Once crawling, they interact with people and objects, refining their grasp and exploring a new world. They will learn about sights, sounds, colors, shapes, dimensions and directions through their movement and perceptual experiences. Their cognition is flourishing. They may be ingenious enough to manipulate a gate barring them from another room! How did they do that? These rich opportunities will require imaginative solutions, helping them to develop a conceptual understanding of the world around them. Every communication they, and we as adults, will make is built on a movement system: oral movement for speech, visual movement for reading, muscular movement for gestures, keyboarding, and handwriting. Yet often we demand performance of children without giving time for this development. Their squirming may seem like disobedience, but they are only attempting to create their own experience-rich environment necessary for learning. The development of their cognition does not merely benefit from movement; cognition *is* movement-driven.

Unfortunately, a common practice in American culture today prevents our young children from multiple and rich experiences. Even infants, now known as ‘container babies’, spend the majority of their day in car seats, carriers, swings, or a multitude of assorted containers. Their opportunities for independent movement and exploration are limited in an attempt to keep them safely contained. Muscle development, depth perception, sensory development, language, coordination and cognition may be altered. The memories and processes that enable us to roll, sit, walk, and run are ‘inseparably linked’ with the processes that enable us to cook, write stories, and dance.<sup>11</sup> All of these processes that are built through abundant experiences will also carry the social and emotional values embedded in each task and each culture.

### **Embodiment in the Classroom**

If we say that classical Christian education is “grounded in human nature and in the nature of learning”<sup>12</sup> then let’s take a closer look at how we naturally grow and learn. If we follow the concept of embodied cognition and our anthropology of an embodied immortal, then

we should acknowledge the value of varied, rich, multiple experiences early in life, and as a part of learning. If we follow common Western Cartesian dualism and the brain and body are treated separately, we consequently create a culture and school environment to fill the child's brain while subduing the child's body.

Many of the skills demanded in the classroom are actually high-level movement skills used to demonstrate the students' cognitive understanding. For example, to show their understanding of upper- and lower-case letters, we often have young children write the letters. They may know the letters, but the skill of handwriting is truly an art, or a technique, that requires a more developed and mature body, along with core stability and fine motor perception. A better tool to demonstrate letter knowledge at a young age would be verbal skills.

But wait...when do we teach the skill of handwriting? Don't they need a lot of practice to develop penmanship? Why do we see such immature writers? It is common to see young writers leaning forward and resting on their desks, primarily because they do not yet have the core muscles needed to sit upright and still for a lengthy time. They may hold their pencil very tightly and at the very tip because they do not yet have the perceptual ability to lightly control it. Often, they will wrap their legs around the legs of the chair, to keep themselves in a steady spot because they have not yet developed the equilibrium to not fall out of the chair! And they may begin to fail or misbehave due to the fatigue of holding their bodies in high performance to demonstrate their knowledge of letters.

We should teach handwriting. However, we should begin with the skills that will support handwriting. A child will be unable to develop good handwriting *habits* without adequate *development*. This is true of many skills that we ask of our children. How many months of practice does it take to teach them to tie their shoes? What if we waited until they were six years old when their dexterity and conceptual understanding had unfolded? They might learn in fifteen minutes what we had spent months teaching. Like the emerging butterfly resting on his cocoon, we can destroy what we rush. Even for children who are almost fully developed, i.e., high school students, we must still recognize their embodiment and even their fatigue; allow them to stand in the back of the room during a lecture, sit on the floor while reading, or have a cup of tea during Socratic discussion.

Working within a theory of embodied cognition does not mean we decrease classroom content or rigor, but that we cultivate opportunities, experiences and exploration for the whole child to learn. It does not mean we merely add movement activities during the day, but that we understand the whole child as a learner, instead of a cognitively driven performer. It does not mean that we hand over the classroom to be run by the child, but that we direct and teach the child within their current capabilities to succeed, and not beyond their timeframe of development. Embodied cognition considers the child moving forward as a whole, growing into an individual like no other, unwrapping, de-enveloping, and gradually unfolding over time. Yes, time.

Embodiment contains a developmental reality. We can no longer divide cognition, development, communication, language, and behavior into separate compartments. We were created to perceive, live in, relate to, and create in the world. As developmental psychologists, philosophers, cognitive theorists, linguists, and others begin to share a common search for an understanding of the workings of embodied cognition, James K. A. Smith helps put it into perspective: "We are incarnate inhabitants in our world... We don't *have* being-in-the-world; we *are* being-in-the-world—embedded, embodied actors..."<sup>13</sup> May we value each unfolding moment.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Dotson-Renta, L.N., (2016, May 19). Why young kids learn through movement. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from [http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/05/why-young-kids-learn-through-movement/483408/?utm\\_source=atltw](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/05/why-young-kids-learn-through-movement/483408/?utm_source=atltw)
- <sup>2</sup> Smith, J.K.A. (2013). *Imagining the kingdom: How worship works*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 49.
- <sup>3</sup> Smith, J.K.A. (2009). *Worship, worldview, and cultural formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 39.
- <sup>4</sup> Winslow, K., (2011, Jan. 25). Heart, soul, (mind) and strength? Retrieved from <http://www.jesusat2am.com/2011/01/25/heart-soul-mind-and-strength/>
- <sup>5</sup> Gilbert, R., (2015, April 9). Body life at Regents. *Regents Weekly Newsletter*.
- <sup>6</sup> Swenson, R.A. (2000). *More than meets the eye: Fascinating glimpses of God's power and design*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- <sup>7</sup> Engel, S. (2006). Thomas H. Wright Lecture: Open Pandora's box: Curiosity and imagination in the classroom. Bronxville, NY: Sarah Lawrence College, Child Development Institute.
- <sup>8</sup> Erickson, M. (nd). *The ghost in the machine: Unraveling the mystery of consciousness*. Retrieved from <http://bigthink.com/think-tank/the-ghost-in-the-machine-unraveling-the-mystery-of-consciousness>
- <sup>9</sup> Campos, J.J., et al. (2000). Travel broadens the mind. *Infancy*, 1(2), 149-219.
- <sup>10</sup> Thelen, E., Schoner, G., Scheier, C., & Smith, L.B. (2001). The dynamics of embodiment: a field theory of infant perseverative reaching. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 24, 1-86, 1. This target article is a discussion of embodied cognition using the vehicle of Piaget's classic "A-not-B error" (i.e. locating the hidden toy). Piaget's work has long been a structure for development and education; however, object-permanence in the infant is re-interpreted here. For a more complete discussion, see Thelen, E. & Smith, L., (1994) *A dynamic systems approach to the development of cognition and action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Kern, A. (2016). The problem with pragmatism in our schools. *Circe, The Imagination Issue*, (4), 49-50.
- <sup>13</sup> Smith, *Imagining*, 44.