Anthropologist Alma Gottlieb (2004) wrote of a game called lolondalE played by children and teens living in Côte d'Ivoire. In the game, one child voluntarily moves into the center of a circle as the other children sing. When the song ends, the child in the center falls backwards into the waiting arms of her friends, an action that Gottlieb called “falling into trust.”

The game of lolondalE is, most obviously, a quite enjoyable diversion; from an aesthetic perspective, it is, as well, a graceful performance that is actually more choreographed than its spontaneous nature might imply. At yet another level, I propose, the song-and-dance routine is also a serious educational project. For educators know that all children’s games, no matter how apparently trivial, teach significant lessons and values. (p. 2)

Games teach those lessons, Gottlieb reminded, not just through the mind, but frequently through the body.

Philosophers and educators have long critiqued the persistence of Western mind/body dualism—the assertion that the human mind and body are separate and distinct. Often in education, the focus of instruction is on the mind, with the body perceived as a vessel in need of desks and a bus to move it from home to school and back again. In his TED Talk, “How Schools Kill Creativity,” creativity expert Ken Robinson (2006)—prior to quipping that college professors see their bodies as “a way of getting their head to meetings” (para. 10)—queried, “We all have bodies, don’t we? . . . Truthfully, what happens is, as children grow up, we start to educate them progressively from the waist up. And then we focus on their heads. And slightly to one side” (para. 9).

Making a similar argument, albeit more bluntly, education scholar Michael Peters (2004) wrote:

Perhaps, the most culturally deeply embedded dualism with which educational theory and practice must come to terms with is the mind/body separation. This dualism historically has developed as an instrument of ‘others’: of separating boys from girls, reason from emotion, minorities from the dominant culture, and classes from each other. (p. 14)

More than semantic shorthand for how to organize curriculum, therefore, the mind/body division sets up conditions for a multiplicity of binaries (boy/girl, heteronormative/queer, ability/disability) that categorize and rank individuals and groups so they can only be conceptualized in opposition to each other. American pragmatist John Dewey lamented that the perceived division of mind and body was so firmly embedded in Western thought and practice that the English language had no single term to link them together. “Consequently,” he wrote, “when we endeavor to establish this unity in human conduct, we still speak of body and mind and thus unconsciously perpetuate the very division we are striving to deny” (Dewey, 1928/2002, qtd. in Brezler, 2004, p. 8).

More recently, educators and researchers have responded to the concern that a perpetuated mind/body dualism creates problematic conditions when it comes to teaching and learning (e.g., Cadwallader, 2010; Erevelles, 2000; Jones & Woglom, 2013). In addition to deeply ingrained practices that result in and emerge from categorizing children, this dualism undermines what teachers well know: that children learn with their minds and their bodies, their emotions and their intellect, the affective
and the cognitive, and there is no simple way to tease them apart.

In this themed Language Arts issue, authors take up notions of embodiment to inquire into how children learn with and through the body/mind, with a particular focus on the arts and play. In “Drama as Serious and Not So Serious Business,” Beth A. Bucholz examines how a performative pedagogy can disrupt notions of children’s bodies and technology use in schools. Kathryn F. Whitmore looks at how young children’s bodies can be a “symbol system in early literacy learning” (p. 25) in her article, “Becoming the Story in the Joyful World of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk.’” Drawing on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Jaye Johnson Thiel examines how following student-generated “lines of flight” can support children’s embodied literacies in “‘Bumblebee’s in Trouble!’ Embodied Literacies during Imaginative Superhero Play.”

In this issue, we also feature a profile of poet Marilyn Singer, the 2015 winner of the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award. Written by Nancy L. Hadaway and Terrell A. Young, the profile provides insights into Singer’s creative process (which includes close observations of human and animal behavior) and the early influences that helped shape her as a writer.

In addition, our Conversation Currents for this issue is a special podcast, “A Talk with Marilyn Singer,” featuring Singer, Hadaway, and Young. In the podcast, Singer discusses her work at length and reads examples of her poetry.

Insights into the development of children’s literate lives continues in the departments. The Research and Policy Department elaborates a conceptualization of reading comprehension development that strives to move away from deficit perspectives. Professional Book Reviews examines books focused on issues of embodiment in relation to teaching and learning. Children’s Literature Reviews recommends titles of recently published books for readers in grades K–8.

We hope you find this themed issue on embodiment in the teaching of children both informative and thought provoking.

References


