



# Philosophy of Body: Children's Perceptions

## MIND, BODY & SELF

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This paper is an account of an ongoing project with second grade students. Our interest as educators and philosophers is to gain insight into children's perceptions of body, while at the same time providing students with the opportunity and environment within which to engage in dialogical inquiry.

We engaged in activities with a second grade class in which the students were unfamiliar with the process of dialogical inquiry about philosophical issues. In our attempt to introduce the methodology as well as the topic philosophy of body, we began with a reading of the philosophical novel, *Pixie*. Students were asked to form a circle and we read Chapter One, which introduces Pixie as an "ordinary and imperfect" child. Throughout the chapter, Pixie engages in philosophical questioning about her world and her perception of body. We find Pixie ruminating over comments made by her parents (e.g. "My father says act like I'm made of rubber" and "My mother says I act like I'm made of vinegar"). And after finding her arm asleep, she raises these questions:

"If all of me was awake, how can part of me be asleep? Have you ever had your arm go to sleep? Isn't it weird? It's like it doesn't even belong to you. How could part of you not belong to you? Either my body and I are the same or they're not the same."

These reflections by Pixie serve as a springboard for problematizing the concept of body, and at the same time Pixie models the process of inquiry and reflection for student readers.

We then asked the students what questions, problems, or concerns they had about the chapter. We had a brief discussion about Pixie's reflections on how her body can be like vinegar or rubber. We asked the students to consider this for themselves, using the prompt "My body is like a \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_". The students talked with each other as they engaged in creating their own similes. The responses were:

**Corinne:** My body is like a radio because when I talk.

**Tara:** My body is like a radio because I talk a lot.

**Christian:** My body is like a rock because I don't move around a lot. When I walk I move a little.

**Mary Kate:** My body is like a calendar because I always know what day it is.

**Dylan:** My body is like a calendar because I always know the date. And it is an artist because if you look at my picture you'll know why.

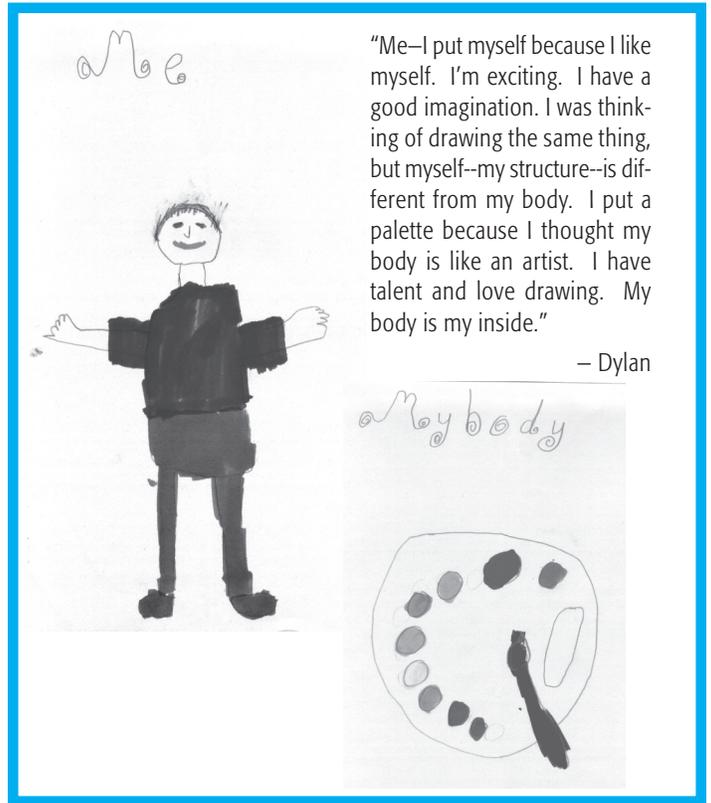
**Hayley:** My body is like me because I am me.

**Charlotte:** My body is like a statue because I stare at stuff a lot.

**Matt:** My body is like a sun because I am always hot.

In our next activity with the students, we discussed our previous activity by remembering Pixie's dilemma "either my body and I are the same or they're not," and asking the students to consider this. After some reflection,

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"Me—I put myself because I like myself. I'm exciting. I have a good imagination. I was thinking of drawing the same thing, but myself—my structure—is different from my body. I put a palette because I thought my body is like an artist. I have talent and love drawing. My body is my inside."

— Dylan

## Education, Virtue, and the Child

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in the world for students to love their teachers. Out of that comes the eager willingness to serve the one who serves you all day long!

This service extends out to various classroom jobs, and eventually to service to the school. This includes helping in the office or the library as well as assisting in younger children's classrooms. Gradually it dawns on the children that their service is simply a reflection of the enormous service that flows to them each day. With this understanding, service becomes the natural expression of virtue flowing freely to meet the world.

This natural expression of generosity and magnanimity (which Plato calls 'the handmaidens of justice') is also on display daily, in the form of the many volunteers who contribute to the life of the school. Parents and friends of the school, including some retirees, are constantly lending support in classrooms, the library, in the administrative offices, etc., providing more opportunities for the children to learn virtue by example.

Clearly, the question of virtue and its relation to education will never cease to fascinate us. Forums will be held, opinions will be offered, books and articles will be written about the subject long after we are gone. Unfortunately, this fascination will never yield the fruit that our nation needs. Action, in the form of living examples, study, and daily practice of the virtues is what is needed. At our school, we believe that we have started down this road. We freely invite all to visit and see for themselves. For schools to be fruitful, the young must be educated in such a way that they live "the good life" naturally and freely. Shakespeare puts it nicely:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,  
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues  
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
As if we had them not.



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the students were given a folded piece of paper, and asked to title one side "Me" and the other side "My body."

The following is a list of comments transcribed as a result of discussions about their drawings:

**Jeremy:** Me – it is a head. You can use more things: see, hear, taste, think and smell. My Body – for this one my body is just the hands and legs. My body can touch and walk.

**Stephen:** Me – it's the same. My Body – it's about me ski-boarding.

**Matthew:** Me – I drew a head because I didn't want to draw the same thing [for both sides]. My Body – because it says my body I drew the whole thing.

**Christian:** Me – I think it would be wrong to have two of the same thing [drawings]. Me and My body are the same. They look the same.

**Corinne:** Me – Just my face because I didn't want it to look the same as my body because they are different. My Body – the head has to be the same because it's me.

**Tara:** Me – I'm drawing myself like I look. They're not really different. My Body – is shown inside so it would be different.

Another activity consisted of an exercise created by contemporary photographer and educator, Wendy Ewald. Her interest in knowing how children identify themselves spurred her to ask students how they regarded their bodies and to choose a part of themselves for her to photograph. We replicated this activity with our students and their responses are provided here:

**Chris:** Hands. This is why I like my hands. Because I can write with them. My hands are special. This is why my hands are special because I can ride my bike with my hands. I like my hands because I can play sports.

**Jeremy:** Left hand. I can touch with my hands. I like my hand because it helps me up when I fall. I like them. I use them. I could write with my left hand.

**Taylor:** Hands. I like my hands because they let me do things. Helpful – my hands are helpful. August – my hands are like August [hot]. Now – my hands know things. Delighting – my hands are happy. Special – my hands are special. My hands can help me play baseball. I can touch things with them.

**Corinne:** Fingers. I like my fingers because I can paint my fingernails (on my fingers). I can feel stuff with my fingers. I can clutch onto things. I can do finger paints.

**Cara:** Eyes. I like my eyes because they glow like a star. I like my eyes because they are beautiful. I love my eyes.

**Mary Kate:** Hands. Helpful – my hands are helpful. Amazing – my hands are very amazing. Nice – my hands are nice to people. Different – my hands are different. Special – my hands are special.

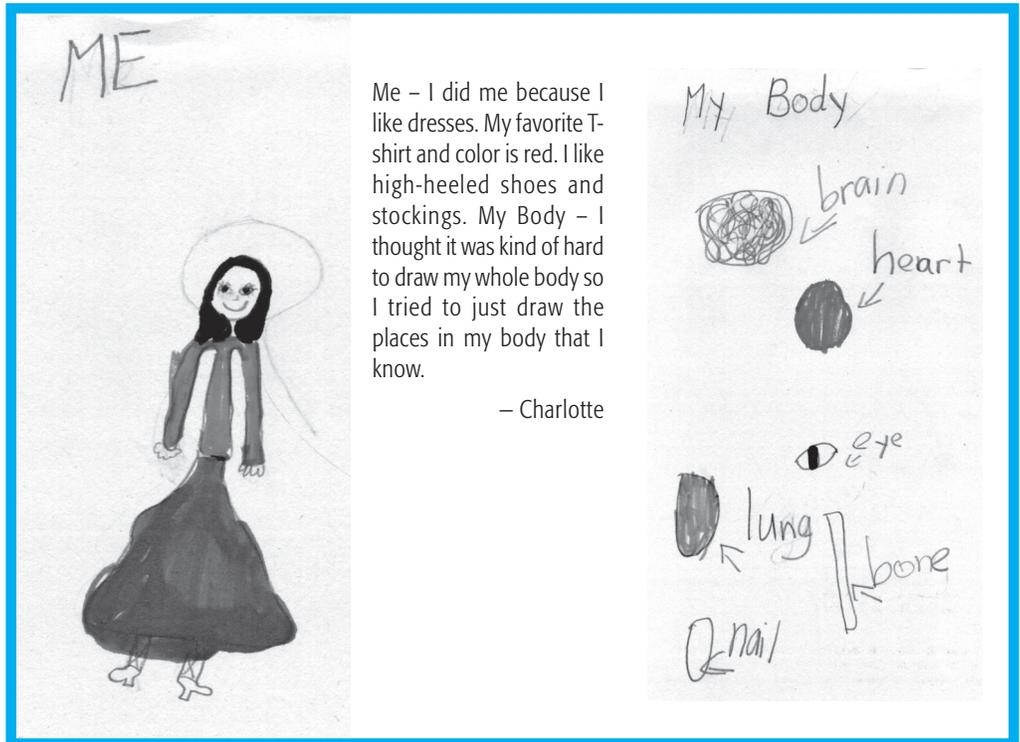
**Dylan:** Eyes. My eyes help me see in any direction I want them to be. Because of my eyes I can see the letter G. I love my eyes so let them be. Because my eyes help me see.

**Hayley:** Heart. I like my heart. My heart is red. My heart keeps me alive. If you don't have a heart you can't love. I love my heart. My heart is circled in my picture.

**Tara:** Mouth. I like my mouth because if I did not have a mouth I would not be able to talk and if I could not talk I would not be able to talk to my family and friends.

**Stephen:** Feet. I like my feet because I like to rollerblade. And I like to run. And I like to jump. I like to get my feet rubbed. I like to play hockey.

**Christian:** Foot. I like my foot because I can hop with it. I can run with it. I can walk with it. I can move it.



**Matthew:** Hands. I'm lucky I have my hands. That I can throw with. That I can catch with. That I can hold with. That I can ride with. That's why I love my hands.

**Charlotte:** Foot. I chose this part of my body. It's my foot. I chose this part of my body because you could run and walk. Without feet we wouldn't be able to walk or run or jog and climb things. My feet can do tricks. Feet are important. Also I could dance with my feet.

**Jessica:** Left leg. I like my left leg because I could not walk. I also like my left leg because I'm lefty. If I had no left leg I couldn't do anything! I think my left leg is special. So that's why I wrote about my left leg.

**Jacob:** Brain. My favorite part of my body is my brain because it's my main sense of control. Without my brain I would be senseless! My brain can make me smart. Without your brain you could not think. I would not have any abilities without my brain.