

THE USE AND MISUSE OF METAPHOR IN EDUCATION AND EDUCATION REFORM

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Research indicates that the use of metaphors to organize and frame questions concerning the teaching/learning process can be an effective tool. More problematic, however, has been the use of metaphor in framing policy questions, especially those metaphors employed to frame national education reform ideas. This article explores several research studies that focus on the use and misuse of metaphor in education. It also offers ideas, based on this prior research, which may help educators generate more effective metaphors in framing both educational inquiry and educational policy making issues.

Introduction

The effectiveness of metaphors in areas of research is well established. Weick (1989), for example, believed metaphor to be an important early part of theoretical development. Schlesinger and Lau (2000) examined the constructive use of metaphor in the field of public policy making and noted how metaphor allowed for the clarifying of ideas and dynamics for both "political elites and the general public" (p. 611). Carpenter (2008) contended that metaphors had the capacity in qualitative research to provide new perspectives on phenomena. Scheffler (1991) asserted that the use of metaphors in science was "indispensable" (p. 45), while Cornelissen (2005) developed a framework for using metaphor in research which provided a "model of how metaphor operates that is more grounded and valid, and thus, more useful from the point of view of organizational theorizing and research" (p. 751).

Bergmann (1982) especially noted the important organizational power of metaphors in scientific study, as their proper use could direct "our orientation toward

a subject matter" (p. 243). But Bergmann also suggested that when metaphors were used in rhetorical settings, such as policy making, they were typically employed as emotive tools. In these instances, metaphors often served as a way of spinning an idea to the advantage of one particular agenda rather than as an effective tool for framing and understanding. It is the nature of this latter issue that educators may need to become more aware.

Metaphors and the Teaching/Learning Process

There have been several in depth examinations concerning the part metaphor can play in education research, especially in terms of improving individual teacher performance. Briscoe (1991), for example, investigated the use of metaphors as a way to help improve teaching practices for teachers attending brief workshop training programs. Bullough and Stokes (1994) explored the individual personal metaphors one group of preservice teachers created to capture their teaching styles as a way of helping these new teachers in their ongo-

ing professional development. They concluded, "The identification and exploration of personal teaching metaphors is one potential means for assisting beginning teachers to productively think about self-as-teacher, to forge personally satisfying and ethically responsible roles, and to assist their development in ways of interest to teacher education" (p. 220). In a similar manner, Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) examined a group of fifty experienced teachers to see what metaphors they used to understand the teaching/learning process. They then compared this group of experienced teachers' understandings to thirty preservice teachers. The researchers discovered the latter group tended to view teaching/learning as "social process" as opposed to the more traditional metaphoric concepts such as "instructing" held by the more experienced teachers. Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp, & Cohn (1989) also explored the metaphorical language teachers used to describe their experiences in the classroom.

Sawada and Caley (1985) attempted to find metaphors "that illustrated long-standing problems in education" (p. 13) as a way of developing framework that they believed better represented the unacknowledged turbulence found in the teaching/learning process. One interesting metaphor which emerged from this particular study was that of "child as investigator" (p. 18). Metaphors have also been used by educators to create prescriptive framework for improving education. Cook-Sather (2003), for example, called for metaphors in education that cast the student as both active participant and as the

primary creator in the education process.

Metaphors have also been employed to examine and improve many specific fields of education. Bishop (1985), Davis and Simmt (2003), and Sfard (1998) have explored the use of metaphors in math education, for example, while Duit (2006) examined the role of analogies and metaphors for teaching science. Social studies education has long been divided between those who support an emphasis on indoctrination and those who stress critical thinking and liberation. Mills (1995) used the metaphors of a unified system and a sliding continuum in an attempt to bring together these two extremes. Meyer (2005) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of a number of metaphors used to describe different aspects of distance education. David Purpel (1989) offered a most innovative idea for metaphor use in education reform, noting that religious images and metaphors were a powerful and mostly untapped source for organizing discourse in this area and suggesting educators be open to "the power of religious ideas, metaphors, concepts, and insights" (p. 67).

Metaphors have also been used to try and capture the overall reality of education. Sfard proposed two metaphors, for example, to describe what she deemed to be the two major thrusts of the overall teaching/learning process—acquisition and participation. The first concept, she believed captured the old traditional view of the teacher providing the water of static knowledge and the student as the sponge. The second point of view, participation, emphasized teaching as a process. Student activities and discourse stood at the cen-

ter of this view. Paavola, Lipponen, and Hakkarainen (2004) later proposed a third category as an add-on to Sfard's—learning as “knowledge creation.”

The above studies suggest that the use of metaphor to organize and frame questions, or to suggest effective responses to problems involving the teaching/learning process, can be a fruitful one. This may be less true, however, when metaphors are employed to help frame and understand education reform. As noted, Bergmann warned that the use of metaphors in policy areas may, ironically, pose a stumbling block to rational discourse on essential issues and questions. Stone (1997) pointed out that policy making involved, “ambiguity, conflict, and competing goals” (p. x). Metaphors put forth to supposedly clarify a response to a political issue may therefore be used to support an unexamined agenda or support only selected ideas from many potential possibilities. Cochran-Smith (2005) believed American education had already fell prey to this same process. She observed reforming education had “become highly politicized” and often seemed completely driven by rhetoric rather than rational dialogue informed by research (p. 183). Chasteen (2011) related the raw, covert practicability in using metaphors in discourse in education in this way. “The metaphors we choose when describing a [policy] problem are of key importance—and their influence is extremely covert. What metaphors do we tend to use in communicating about education reform? Which ones should we use? Obviously, we should use different metaphors when talking to reform friendly versus reform-antagonistic” (p. 2).

National Education Reform Movements: When the Metaphor is the Message

Cochran-Smith assured us that debating education reform “by spinning out dramatic metaphors . . . is not a new phenomenon” (p. 182). She told of one critic in 1953, for example, who spoke of traditional teacher education programs creating an “educational wasteland.” In 1990, another critic of how American teachers were trained claimed the system had gotten education “off track.” In 2002, teacher training was described by yet another detractor as “a broken system” (p. 183). Cochran-Smith believed that when it came to education reform, the metaphor typically became the emotive message. Such “metaphors are intended to conjure hopeless situations that can be remedied only by pursuing radically different directions, a conclusion that neatly paves the way for the policy recommendations of their architects” (p. 183). Diane Ravitch (1983) also spoke of historical complaints about American education. She specifically examined the powerful “Progressive” reform movement, which she contended had failed by the mid 1950s. She pointed out how this particular metaphor, touting progressive ideas and practices, had eventually turned ironic. In the end, progressive education reformers, Ravitch observed, became the “keepers of the sacred texts, defending ideas and practices of the past, ignorant of the emerging issues in American life and education” (p. 78).

While a number of education reform ideas would emerge after progressive education reform's demise, including one in science and math in 1957 following the launching of Sputnik, none of these reform

notions would catch a great amount of national attention until the "A Nation at Risk" initiative. This education reform program, with its powerful image, emerged from a federal report in 1983 and was driven by concerns that our nation was losing its economic competitive edge over the Japanese and other countries. The report laid a great share of the blame for this problem at the feet of American education. "Our society and its educational institutions," the report noted, "seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."

The "nation at risk" metaphor, as a policy guide, was emotive, as it appealed both to fear and to patriotic fervor. Who among us wishes our country harm? The core statement regarding the direction education should take on a national level, however, while containing political conservative leanings, offered ideas most groups could abide by and use to accomplish their specific political goals.

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, completely guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interest but also the progress of society itself (A Nation at Risk).

"A Nation at Risk" program further suggested that American education existed primarily to keep the country economically ahead of the rest of the world, an idea that is certainly debatable. The report also recommended that American schools on all levels adopt more vigorous and measurable standards but specifics were vague. The reform initiative eventually inspired more reform movements centered on the market driven idea of outcome based education, as some states began developing their own set of assessment criteria. Perhaps "Risk's" greatest metaphor offspring, however, was the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001.

One would have to look long and hard to find a more hopeful phrase than "no child left behind." As Meier and Wood (2004) pointed out, "Who could object to a law that promises no child left behind when it comes to our school?" After all, isn't this the great promise of our school system—that all children . . . have equal access to an education that allows them to enjoy freedoms and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy?" (p. vii). Meier and Wood went on to point out, however, what they believed to be several fatal flaws with the NCLB Act.

School quality, Meier and Wood argued, could not be measured by one essential yearly test in the different disciplines. This practice, the authors contended, would actually bring the quality of education down. NCLB confused "test scores with quality schooling even though there is no evidence that high scores on these tests predict anything about a child's success in life after school" (xii). The researchers

were also greatly concerned with the lack of funding for carrying out the specifics of the act and for the greater gap between rich and poor that carrying out NCLB would likely create. Three recent detailed studies of data driven education reform—Hout and Elliott (2011), Ravitch (2010), and Tucker (2011)—strongly supported the Meier and Wood concerns. Both the Hout and Elliott and the Tucker study were touted as offering detailed arguments based on inclusive and non-ideological academic research. Perhaps the most interesting analysis, however, was Diane Ravitch's.

Ravitch has long been the academic darling of conservative groups. Her recent shift in opinion regarding accountability education is particularly amazing given her previous harsh criticisms of the American education system prior to NCLB. In her 2011 book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, she asserted, "The problem with using tests to make important decisions about people's lives is that standardized tests are not precise instruments. Unfortunately, most elected officials do not realize this, nor does the general public" (p. 152). Accountability "as we know it now is not helping our schools" (p. 163).

The recent National Research Council report, edited by Hout and Elliott, and representing a longitudinal study regarding the effectiveness of data driven assessment programs such as NCLB, uncovered a number of problems with market driven ideas to reform education. Generally, it was discovered these efforts had not improved the quality of American educa-

tion, and, in some instances, had made it even worse. Tucker's work offered similar findings.

No Child Left Behind is a powerful metaphor. Functional metaphors, however, must be congruent with the thing they purport to describe (Palmer and Dunford, 1996). "No Child Left Behind," ironically based on a market view of education, seemed to fail in this regard, primarily because the particulars of the plan did not take into account the complexity of a democratic society and of the teaching process. Baker (2002) argued, in this regard, that the use of a market metaphor for education reform, she offered "management by results" as an example, reflected a system that would not work well in the education arena. Baker asserted,

The articulation of standards as a metaphor and their operational definition undermined the stated intention of standard-based reform; the measurement system does not reflect the intentions of the system—that is, all children can achieve high standards. In addition, the interpretation of results does not reflect specific stands. As a result, interpretations are global—"we're doing well," "We're doing poorly"—but no method of focus on particular remedies is clear. . . . Teachers get rewards, or students get certificates or summer school—but without clarity about the most effective change strategies for improvement (p. 8).

Baker also raised the essential question of "What are the practical ways of focusing on the poorest performing students?" In the business world, you fire workers who, for whatever reason, cannot do the work that brings maximum profit. Do we want to do this same thing in education with students who, for reasons such as poverty, bad home life, or disability, can't measure up, or, punish an entire school if such students drag down the overall school system's scores? "Management by results, implies," Baker asserted, "that people, given poor performance, will know how to fix the problem" (p. 9). This, however, is often not the case, especially where poverty or dysfunctional family situations exist.

Interestingly, the gap between what the metaphor "No Child Left Behind" offered and what the plan actually stated and achieved inspired several humorous parodies—"No Child Left" and "No Child Left Behind?," to name a few.

Most recently, in 2009, the "Race to the Top" initiative was announced by the Obama administration. Like NCLB, "Race to the Top" proposed using data driven assessment to reward or punish school systems as a way of making education more accountable. The program also touted school choice, a practice many critics claim would discriminate against poor communities. The essential issue with the metaphor itself concerns the idea of education as a race, especially one where the opportunities for every student are not equal to begin with. Races have winners and losers. The spotlight stays on the former. Losers are quickly forgotten and ignored. If "Race to the Top" is to be true

to the metaphorical image it proposes, helping the disadvantaged should not be a part of the plan. A pure race to the top would be exclusive. One might argue that the metaphor of a race, in terms of describing the core of what we wish the education process in this country to be, would be inconsistent with some of the principles of a democracy such as fairness and equality.

Mills (1995) maintained that a society's educational system should reflect that particular nation's values. In a democracy such as ours, those values are heavily grounded in powerful political beliefs. Wilson (1983) has pointed out that almost all prior studies regarding what these political values are all tend to agree on four basic ideas. They are the values of 1. liberty, 2. individualism and personal freedom, 3. equality of opportunity, and 4. social justice. However, Wilson went on to relate the contradictory nature of these values when put into practice, noting, for example, that "Equality of opportunity seems an attractive idea, but sometimes it can be pursued only by curtailing personal liberty, another attractive idea" (p. 74). Gagnon (1988) also noted this conflict concerning the four basic American political values. "These impulses inevitably clash, yet each is indispensable to the preservation of a bearable level of another" (p. 44). Tocqueville (1835, 1971) may have been one of the first to see and discuss this paradox, having observed how democracies contradictorily value both liberty and equality, both personal freedom and social justice. The story of American history has often demonstrated that blending these conflicting values has frequently been

accomplished through pragmatic compromise and a recognition and respect for each value. American education faces the difficult task of integrating these often conflicting values into the education process. Metaphors may be helpful in this task but, in doing so, should reflect the complexity of the system. In a nation of diversity, one which professes democracy as its core point of reference, education reform metaphors such as “No Child Left Behind, and “Race to the Top” seem to fail in this regard. NCLB falls short because it never achieved, and perhaps never intended to achieve, what the phrase purported. The same could be said for “Race to the Top.” While emphasizing the American values of liberty and individualism, the phrase clearly suggested excluding the important American values of equality in terms of opportunity and social justice.

Conclusion

Educators may need to be especially aware of policy makers’ misuse of metaphors. Baker (2002) reminded us that “policy initiatives” in education, “are almost always conveyed in shorthand, in a form of metaphor, so the public can understand without difficulty what is proposed, so as to enable proponents to develop political support” (p. 1). Baker went on to relate what she believed to be the three metaphors guiding educational policy and their “mismatched measures.” (p. 9).

- All children can learn
- High standards, aligned systems
- Management by results

Baker also thought “the prognosis for

“metaphor-rife reform” in education a poor one (p.7). Such reforms, she believed, were “politically rather than technically driven, based in part on public perception and the power of various constituencies” (9). Baker offered her own metaphor for reasonable reform in education, one she believed took into consideration multiple views—a “map of school learning.” Overall, Baker contended, “The future and quality of education depends upon our ability, with clarity, to transform our wishes, our hopes, and our metaphors into practices and activities that demonstrably affect students, teachers, and parents” (p. 11).

Values such as accountability and choice do have a place in education reform, and the business world has much to offer education in terms of organization and effectiveness. But educating young people in a democracy is more complex than making widgets. Reforms that weigh too heavily against equality of opportunity and social justice, for example, are exclusive in nature. Shaker (2010) was especially emphatic regarding what he considered to be the misuse of metaphor in recent education reform, believing these metaphors were too often geared toward the market place. The latter, he argued, were not nearly reflective enough regarding the complexity of the teaching/learning process in a democracy. “Educators,” he also contended, “have explicit values that weren’t drawn from the marketplace, or sports, or war” (p. 2). The problem of the misuse of metaphor in education, Shaker further argued, “is one part of the general capture of American discourse by language that is skillfully sold by those who work at this

task for hire." He suggested that in response to this "general capture of American discourse" educators speak out "in venues of all types with our own distinctive language and imagery to present our vision of society and schools" (p. 3). Shaker suggested a number of such phrases. Among them were,

- Education is creative
- Education takes both familiar and unforeseen form
- Education takes time
- Education emphasizes cooperation, not competition
- Education is ultimately beyond measurement in its effect

Ravitch (2010), concurred, having noted that "Our educational problems are a function of our lack of education vision, not a management problem that requires an army of business consultants. . . . The fundamentals of good education are to be found in the classroom, the home, the community, and the culture" (p. 225). If Ravitch is correct, perhaps more time, money, and effort should be spent in education reform connecting and improving these areas.

Palmer and Dunford (1996) observed that metaphors continue to be used in fields from management to the social sciences, "despite conflicts about their use and purpose" (p. 701). Metaphors, they pointed out, are highly effective for framing general problems and getting at the heart of processes. This review of the literature involving studies which examined the use of metaphors in education research strongly indicated that the use of metaphors can be an effective tool in exploring many aspects of the education process. This

review of literature further suggested that metaphors are less successful in their overall helpfulness for education when applied to the arena of education policy making. The educational process is a complex one, so multifaceted that no one point of view serves to have all the answers. In these instances, Palmer and Dunford argued that multiple metaphors may be needed in order to avoid "excessive commitment to favored points of view." Any attempt to place "one perspective over others," they contended, "will be at least an exercise in dogmatic opportunism" (p. 695).

Given the actual complexities of education in a democracy, it might be more accurate to accept, as Sfard (1998) proposed that "one metaphor is not enough" when it comes to describing education or suggesting education reform ideas in any broad way (p. 10). There has been one metaphor in particular, however, that has been occasionally offered to try and unify the many diverse sides of education reform efforts: the concept of community. Perhaps the most popular example of this usage is found in the "It takes a village" idea. Short and Burke (1991) believed the community image captured the "risk-taking, reflection, and collaboration" present in the education process (p. 16). Winkelmann (1991) however, took argument with using this metaphor to try and organize reform. "Community," she pointed out, suggested human beings working "together toward a common goal" (p. 1). Taking into consideration the political nature of education, Winkelmann offered the concept of education as "collectivity" as a metaphor for bringing cohesion to the diversity and con-

flicts found in the classroom. The researcher contended “collectivity” offered “the randomness necessary to capture the dynamic flux—the alignments and collisions—of discourse in use. . . . It can capture the functional nature of discourse and [different] classroom groups: temporary arrangements in which students have multiple intentions, motivations, and goals” (pp. 24-25).

It could be said that multiple intentions, motivations, and goals exist in the arena of education reform as well. Consequently, Winkelmann’s collectivity idea may merit exploration for capturing some type of inclusive educational reform. However, as long as one-sided political agendas are the primary goal of reform education, compromise and rational discourse are probably unlikely.

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