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A Mixed Methods Analysis of Students' Views of Politics

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Abstract

Mixed methods research (MMR) on learning combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a broader picture of the phenomenon being studied. Interest in politics has been regarded as the foundation of civic commitment in adulthood. Therefore, there is a need for studies that can show the multifaceted aspects of students' view of politics. The aim of the present study is to describe students' ideas about politics by means of a mixed methods study. Data is based on the open answers of 152 eight grade students in Italy. Parallel mixed data analysis was performed. Results showed a complex structure of the students' ideas about politics. Both qualitative and quantitative aspects are depicted. Results showed that mixed methods research can discover aspects and properties of a phenomenon that are not predictable a priori by the researcher.
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Keywords: students' view of politics, mixed methods research, metaphor.

1. Introduction

The growing need to acquire a precise vision of the broad and complex phenomenon being studied has led to the widespread use of mixed methods of analysis as a valid methodological approach in the context of social research. Mixed methods research (MMR) is a broad definition referring to research that includes and integrates more than one paradigmatic or methodological approach, method of data collection, and/or type of analysis strategy, with a purpose that goes beyond what could be achieved with any one method alone (Bazely e Kemp, 2012; Alivernini, 2012). The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches applied to data collected through the use of metaphor is a good example of the possible integration of different methods (Moser, 2000).

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1.1. The theoretical background of the metaphor

The metaphor, considered as an analogy that allows people to represent an experience in the terms of another, thus acquiring an understanding of complex concepts or new situations (Vosniadou e Ortony 1989), has long been considered a purely linguistic construction. The cognitive theory of the metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) was, in this regard, a turning point in the field of cognitive linguistics. These authors, starting from the observation that the metaphor is present in literary language as well as in ordinary everyday language, claim that it is primarily a conceptual construction that does not concern language alone but also thought and reason ("Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature", Lakoff and Johnson, ibid.) According to this perspective, the metaphor, understood as the projection of attributes from one schema (the source domain of the metaphor) to another schema (the target domain of the metaphor) is capable of generating a system of conceptual and linguistic correspondences (mapping), and is a form of thought with the power to give a structure to our perception for the purpose of carrying out conceptual operations (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Metaphorical concepts, which make it possible to categorize our experience in the form of language, are familiar in as much as they derive from interactions with the environment. They are culturally mediated, as well as consistent with the values and dominant belief systems in the culture of belonging.

1.2 Metaphor research in psychology

The great contribution of Lakoff and Johnson opened the way to new areas of research not only in the field of cognitive linguistics. In the particular case of psychology, interest in the study of metaphors involved the clinical context (Rodetburg, 1998; Gordon, 1992), in addition to various different sectors of psychological research. Within the paradigms of cognitive research, for example, metaphors were studied as examples of mental models (Johnson-Laird, 1989) as well as analogical reasoning and problem solving (Vosniadou & Ortony, 1989), thus showing how analogies (and therefore also metaphors) are used by people to make sense of the world. In the psycho-educational field a wide range of studies have recently been developed that have used the metaphor as an instrument for investigating the representations and opinions of teachers regarding a range of different conceptions such as teaching and learning (Saban et. al., 2007; Saban, 2010; Alger, 2009) or school (Scalera et. al., 2007).

1.3 Aims and hypotheses of the study

In the light of the above, it is plausible, as well as opportune and interesting due to a whole series of aspects, to try using the metaphor as a tool to investigate the mental representations of individuals with regard to various important but at the same time also partly "abstract" issues, such as politics. In this regard, it has been noted how an interest in politics at a young age constitutes a basis for subsequent civic engagement in adulthood (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). As a part of the theoretical framework of Lakoff & Johnson, and with the Italian socio-cultural context, the present study has the following objectives:

1)   to identify the patterns of metaphors used by students to describe their ideas concerning the concept of politics;
2)   to explore the categories within which metaphors and the corresponding representations they communicate were organized.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and collection process

The data that was collected is based on the responses of 152 Italian students attending the first three years of middle school. In order to investigate their views on politics, they were asked to formulate a metaphor based on the following prompt: "Politics is like...". The analogy between the target domain (politics) and the source domain is emphasized by the word "like" that was intended to facilitate the expression of the implicit beliefs of the participants.