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Understanding teachers' attitude toward educational reforms through metaphors



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines what representations of metaphors are held by teachers and how those representations express teachers' positions about change through educational reform. Metaphors indicate that teachers hold negative perceptions toward educational reforms. Findings signify the contradictions between what teachers are expecting and what they are experiencing in their everyday reality during educational reforms. The study present four "types" of teachers differing from each other how they experience and deal with the reforms. All four "types" of teachers strongly believe that extensive reform is needed, but each need different supports to lead the change.

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1. Introduction

Our modern age is characterized by a great desire to change (Priestley, 2011). Education systems all around the world are constantly changing under the pressures to improve, innovate and supply evidence of higher achievements (Day & Smethem, 2009; Fullan, 2011; Luttenberg, Carpay, & Veugelers, 2013; Priestley, 2011), through systemic reforms which are usually planned in advance. In many countries, schools are now expected to deal with additional functions that were once in the absolute domains of family, religion or work (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Fullan (2011) defines ideal educational reform as deriving from the goal of "raising the bar for all students and closing the gap for lower performing groups", equipping them with the "skills and abilities required to be successful world citizens" (Fullan, 2011; p.4). However, Day and Smethem (2009) highlight that reforms may not always lead to renewal and when forced by governments may raise resistance among those supposed to implement them in the field. Intrinsic motivation, educational improvement, teamwork, and extensive affect are the most crucial elements for a whole system reform (Fullan, 2011). Promotion of educational reform depends primarily on teachers' belief in its need and efficacy and their sense of ownership (Hinde, 2004). Thus, how teachers position themselves in relation to teacher Education, teaching, schooling, and learning reveals much about their needs from teacher education; the obligations and responsibilities they feel toward teaching and students; and the roles they are prepared to enact (Pinnegar, Mangelson, Reed & Groves, 2011).

As the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggests, most of the language we use is metaphorical (Pinnegar et al., 2011). Humans use words and images to interpret life, their experiences, and even their sense of self (Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw, & Barry, 2010). Recent studies (e.g. Alger 2009; Mahlios et al., 2010; Pinnegar et al., 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010) have supported the use of teacher metaphors as a tool to examine how they perceive their professional identities (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) and to gain insights into authentic thoughts and feelings regarding

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teaching (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997; Zhao 2009). Teacher metaphoric appraisal and feedback has the power to improve performance and inform teachers' professional development (Fullan, 2011; Zhao et al., 2010).

Thus, this study aims to reveal teachers' perceptions and attitudes through educational reform using teachers' metaphors.

1.1. Teachers in times of educational reforms and changes

In our rapidly transforming global society, educational reform has become a fact of life for teachers (Priestley, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Usually, educational reforms are imposed top-down and land on teachers without their having been consulted, although they are required to change behavior patterns and sometimes even values and assumptions (Fullan 2006; Raz, 2006). All around the world they are required to keep up with constant diversification in society, knowledge development and increased access to knowledge while anticipating new roles (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). They are held accountable for students' well-being and citizenship education as well as their progress and attainment (Day & Smethem, 2009; Day, 2002). They perform in ever-shifting contexts and within unstable circumstances; they need to continually develop themselves professionally (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Zhao et al., 2010). Thus, teacher educators need to consider significant and relevant ways to support teachers, help them transform their practice; update their pedagogical skills and professional knowledge (Zhao et al., 2010).

The problem of educational reforms is one of power (Hinde, 2004). Leaders who want immediate results and focus on standards and assessments will fail to achieve educational reform (Fullan, 2011), and end up making teachers feel increasingly disempowered and professionally marginalized (Ball, 2008). Whenever teachers are viewed only as implementers and the focus remains on external control and results, implementation may be superficial and characterized by teachers' lack of ownership, passiveness, reduced autonomy, and limited motivation to improve themselves and respond to the reform (Luttenberg et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2010).

People gain motivation when they feel effective and engage in something meaningful and contributing (Fullan, 2011). Meaningful engagement with innovation enables teachers to become agents of change (Priestley, 2011). Hence, teachers have recently been acknowledged as playing a crucial role in the success of educational reforms (Luttenberg et al., 2013), and are now viewed as joint designers, with focus on internal processes and on teacher participation, professional trust and autonomy (Priestley, 2011). It appears that countries who developed the entire teaching profession and came to trust and respect teachers better transform the system (Fullan 2011). As cited in Luttenberg et al. (2013) this is the reason that attention is now being paid to the influence of teachers' individual factors on educational reforms, such as: personal identity, trust (Louis, 2007) and beliefs (e.g. Seung, Park, & Narayan, 2011).

Teachers' beliefs (or visions) impact their planning, teaching, interaction and action in classroom and can be changed with practice and experience (Hammerness 2003; Mahlios et al., 2010). Beliefs build the individual's identity as a teacher (Pinnegar et al., 2011), deriving from personal experience, previous schooling, and formal knowledge (Mahlios et al., 2010). One way to examine teachers' beliefs is to identify the conceptual devices they use to make sense of their work and lives—their use of metaphors (Mahlios et al., 2010).

1.2. Metaphor as a powerful tool to take a stand

Metaphors are mental constructs (Lakoff & Johnson's 1980) that lie beneath the surface of a person's awareness and serve as a cognitive device for analogical framing and the defining of experience in order to achieve meaning about life (Massengill Shaw & Mahlios, 2008). They link the projection of one schema on to another (Lakoff & Johnson's 1980), organize our thinking, structure the way we perceive situations, influence our actions (Mahlios et al., 2010; Marshall, 1990; Pinnegar et al., 2011; Seung et al., 2011), and provide insights into ideas that are not explicit or consciously held (Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001; Leavy, McSorley, & Boté, 2007). Metaphors are not just figures of speech, but constitute an essential mechanism of the mind allowing the modeling and reification of prior experience (Zhao et al., 2010). We develop conceptual metaphors to aid meaning to experience, and then use it as a filter to make sense of new experiences (Alger, 2009). By doing so we highlight what we have in common with others, and make our own pasts, present activities, dreams, hopes and goals coherent (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The most basic level metaphor we form is an image schema (Amin et al., 2015; Amin, Jeppsson, & Haglund, 2015), for example, Inbar (1996) found a discrepancy between teachers and students on their view that schooling is like prison. Teacher-held metaphors provide vital and sometimes unconscious information about the kinds of teacher-student relationships they attempt to create and the obligations, duties and responsibilities they will enact (Pinnegar et al., 2011). Over the past two decades researchers and teacher educators have shown increasing interest in metaphor research as a means to better understand how teachers conceptualize their most basic views about schooling, life, children, curriculum, and teaching (Mahlios et al., 2010).

1.3. Examining attitude through changes using teachers' metaphors

The process of selecting and emphasizing metaphor offers us an insight into hidden aspects of language by emphasizing some selected features of a whole phenomenon (Inbar 1991). As cited by Alger (2009) metaphor analysis has been used to raise teachers' awareness, encourage reflective practice, challenge core beliefs, and promote change in classroom practices.

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