Prospective teachers' metaphorical conceptualizations of learner

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the metaphorical images that prospective teachers in Turkey formulated to describe learners. Participants ($N = 2847$) completed the prompt "A student is like … because …" to indicate their conceptualizations of learner. Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Altogether 98 well-articulated metaphorical images were identified and 12 conceptual themes were developed. Significant associations were detected between teacher trainees' gender, programme type and status in programme, and the 12 conceptual themes. Metaphors provided a cognitive lens into prospective teachers' thinking and cognition. Implications for teacher education and further research are discussed.

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1. Introduction and purpose

Postulated by George Lakoff (a linguist) and Mark Johnson (a philosopher) in their seminal book of *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, the cognitive theory of metaphor maintains that "most of what we think, experience and do is very much a matter of metaphor" (p. 3). From the standpoint of the cognitive theory, far from being a mere figurative or decorative device, metaphors structure our perceptions, thoughts, and actions. They act as a lens, a screen, or a filter through which a subject is (re)viewed and become a mental model for thinking about something in light of another. The metaphorical expression of "A student is like a white page", for instance, refers not just to what students are like, but indeed to what it is like to be a learner.

1.1. The cognitive function of metaphor

Metaphor involves "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). According to MacCormac (1990, p. 9), "To describe the unknown, we must resort to concepts that we know and understand, and that is the essence of a metaphor – an unusual juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar". Thus, metaphor employs a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system. To put it in Quale's words:

> It is a descriptive analogy, serving to illuminate whatever phenomenon A is being considered, by drawing 'lines of association' to some other phenomenon B that we feel we already understand. The qualification 'already understand' is essential here: the metaphor is *asymmetric*, in the sense that in the context of explaining A, the referent phenomenon B is assumed to be understood! Thus, some (not all) characteristics of B are used to *explain* … some corresponding characteristics of A. (Quale, 2002, p. 447)

It is suggested that metaphors do not prove or demonstrate anything new by themselves, but enable us to see in a new light what we are doing or experiencing. Using a metaphor for teaching, for example, is not a way of doing teaching; it is rather a way of talking about teaching. Thus, a "metaphor is employed when one wants to explore and understand something esoteric, abstract, novel, or highly speculative" (Yob, 2003, p. 134). Once expressed, however, metaphors also project a form of argument or a genuine preference for something over another. As Kliebard pointed out about three decades ago:

> To see the school as if it were a factory and the curriculum as a means of production is not merely to make an observation; that metaphor has imbedded in it an element of persuasion, and one who is not critically aware of the power of metaphor can easily become its victim. (Kliebard, 1982, p. 15)

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1.2. The practical value of metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theoretical approach to metaphor as cognition "posits a dialectic relationship between the social and the cognitive, whereby the mind and, by extension, the metaphorical conceptualizations that mediate mental processes are seen as both products and determinants of the social environment" (Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 96). This makes metaphor a powerful cognitive tool for educators in search of meaning and sense of self. In Black and Halliwell's (2000) study of 14 Australian pre-school teachers, for example, one participant explained her self-image of being a pre-school teacher with the "erosion" metaphor as follows:

> Sometimes I feel like an island. Years come and children come to visit a while, have the fun they can, and learn what they can then they leave again – like tourists. The island (me) is providing as much for them as possible while they are there. Part of the island is being eroded by wind, ocean etc. – like how I feel when I cannot do much for a particular child – I'm being worn out. Of course the other side of the island has a resort where people are having a great time and are completely unaware of how the other side of the island is being worn away. Even though the island has solid foundations and is not going anywhere despite cyclones and bad weather something must be done about the eroding section or in time it will all wear away (Black & Halliwell, 2000, p. 108).

Through the "erosion" metaphor, thus, this teacher developed an awareness of the demands and pressures of her work in childcare, and of her need to take some "erosion protection" measures. The metaphor also helped her identify her major dilemma regarding teaching pre-school children (i.e., How to cope with the pressures of teaching pre-school children while, at the same time, trying to meet their individual needs and interests?) and made her examine how her current emotions and actions affected her teaching in action. In short, as was the case for this pre-school teacher, metaphor construction can be a liberating experience for educators by helping them understand the professional circumstances that they are currently involved in.

1.3. Metaphors of teaching and learning

Within the educational context, metaphors play an important role in gaining insight into school people's thinking and reasoning about teaching and learning. Inbar (1996), for example, collected about 7042 metaphorical images provided by 409 students and 254 educators in Israel and found that about 18% of educators and 7% of students imagined learners as "empty receptacles" (e.g., cup). Again, about 10% of educators' and 3% of students' metaphors involved images of learners as "clay" (e.g., dough). Perhaps a more critical finding of the study was that about 33% of students and 8% of educators conceptualized learners as "captive beings" (e.g., slave).

Similarly, Bozlk (2002) asked 49 freshmen enrolled in a general education cluster course at a mid-western university in the United States to create metaphors for themselves as learners at four points during an academic year (the first day of class, at mid-term, the last day of class, and the following semester). As a result of this exercise, a total of 35 well-articulated metaphors were collected. Findings indicated that most students tend to come to higher education seeing themselves as passive learners, ready to soak up the teachers' knowledge (e.g., sponge). They are also concerned with retaining their information once they acquire it (e.g., person with Alzheimer's).

Do prospective and experienced teachers view teaching and learning differently? Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) analyzed the metaphorical images of 50 experienced teachers and compared them with those of 38 education major seniors in Spain. Findings revealed that 57% of experienced teachers and 56% of prospective teachers shared traditional metaphors depicting teaching and learning as "transmission of knowledge". Moreover, about 38% of experienced teachers and 22% of preservice teachers expressed "constructivist metaphors". While only 5% of the metaphors of experienced teachers conceived learning as a "social process", 22% of preservice teachers' metaphors reflected this conceptual theme.

Do variations exist in prospective teachers' thinking of teaching and learning? Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007) investigated 1142 Turkish preservice teachers' metaphorical images of teacher. Findings revealed that while prospective Primary teachers generated more "shaping-oriented" (e.g., sculptor) metaphors, prospective English teachers produced more "facilitation-oriented" (e.g., compass) metaphors, and prospective Computer teachers provided more "transmission-oriented" (e.g., public fountain) metaphors. Again, females appeared to be more "counselling-oriented" (e.g., psychologist) than males who in turn provided more "cooperation-oriented" (e.g., tour guide) metaphors. Although no statistically significant class level differences were detected, entry-level participants appeared to be more "growth-oriented" (e.g., gardener) than their exit-level peers, who in turn generated more "facilitation-oriented" (e.g., lighthouse) metaphors.

Do perceptions of prospective teachers change over the course of teacher training? Leavy, McSorley, and Bote (2007) examined the changes in 124 Irish and American first-year preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning by asking them to provide metaphors at the beginning and the end of the semester. Results showed that 49% of teacher trainees' initial metaphors gathered around the behaviourist perspective, followed by 24% constructivist metaphors, 9% socio-cognitive metaphors, and 18% self-referential metaphors. Classification of the metaphors after training yielded a significant increase in the constructivist metaphors (44%), followed by 42% behaviourist metaphors, 6% socio-cognitive metaphors, and 8% self-referential metaphors.

Do prospective teachers' self-images differ from the images they have of their former and mentor teachers? Saban (2004) investigated 363 exit-level Turkish teacher candidates' metaphorical images of selves and compared them with the ones they had about their both former school teachers and current mentor teachers. Data for the study were gathered through the administration of a Likert-style questionnaire consisting of 20 metaphorical images of teacher (i.e., shopkeeper, driver, jockey, technician, potter, doctor, mechanic, commander, judge, prison-guard, parent, baby-sitter, gardener, juggler, comedian, tool provider, compass, tour guide, coach, and conductor). The first 10 metaphors symbolized the teacher-centred perspective while the latter 10 metaphors represented the student-centred perspective in education. According to the results, prospective teachers appeared to be less teacher-centred and more student-centred than both of their former and mentor teachers.

Do teachers in different work contexts conceive their teaching roles and identities differently? Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, and Kron (2003) investigated 60 Israeli vocational high school teachers' images of self in different work contexts to see if teachers' workplace conditions affected their perceptions of professional self. Half of the teachers taught Group 1 (high-achieving) students and the other half taught Group 2 (low-achieving) students. Findings indicated that out of the three dominant pictorial metaphors (i.e., animal keeper, conductor, and shopkeeper), 35% of teachers chose the animal keeper metaphor, and the Group 2 teachers preferred this choice more. About 30% of teachers chose the conductor metaphor, with the Group 1 teachers inclining towards this choice more. The shopkeeper metaphor (23.3%) was picked by both groups of teachers about the same level.