



Original research

Metaphorical interpretations of the educator-student relationship: An innovation in nursing educational research

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that collecting and analysing metaphors is a useful strategy in seeking data that are difficult to collect via verbal interviews or that cannot be represented by statistics. This study explored nursing students' perceptions of the educator-student relationship using metaphorical interpretation. A qualitative study with a personal essay approach was adopted. A total of 124 students were recruited from a nursing school in Hong Kong. A personal essay form was distributed to the participants. They were asked to give a metaphor with explanations to describe the power dynamics in the educator-student relationship, within 200 words in English or Chinese. After some thought, the participants each gave their own metaphor individually, because the aim of this study was to collect their subjective experiences. The results were presented as follows: a) The overall description of the metaphors; b) The three groups of metaphors; c) The five natures of metaphors; d) The most significant metaphors; and e) The four thematic meanings – (i) nurturing role; (ii) guiding role; (iii) insufficient connection; and (iv) promoting development. The implications for research methods and nurse education of collecting and analyzing metaphors were discussed. Discrepancies in metaphorical interpretations are to be expected, as interpretations are dependent on the researchers' socio-cultural background, personal experiences, professional training, languages spoken, and other factors.

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1. Background

Metaphors are regarded as a language and a dimension of human understanding and relationships that encourage free expression. Metaphors refer not only to language, but also to thoughts and actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The metaphor is a tool for communicating and expressing one's unconscious thinking and subjective experience. Metaphors are not only 'a figure of speech', but also 'a mode of thought' (Lakoff, 1986). Metaphors are often viewed as 'an implied comparison between two dissimilar objects', in which the characteristics of one object are carried over and transferred to another object during the comparison (Sopory and Dillard, 2002). A person cannot think abstractly without having a similar metaphor in mind, because this process allows people to understand an abstract concept by referring to another relatively

more concrete or structured concept (Yu, 2003). People can also accommodate unfamiliar or abstract concepts into a knowledge base through metaphors.

Saban (2006) identified various functions of the metaphor from a number of teaching and educational studies. For example, the metaphor sometimes serves as a tool for reflecting the teacher's teaching experience and developing an awareness of the demands and pressures of the work, a method for students to describe their learning experiences and evaluate the programme, a medium to enhance understanding of teachers' under-cover perceptions, and an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate how they perceive themselves and their professional identity. Allbritton (1995) summarised three main distinct functions of the metaphor: 1) promoting a connection between speaker and listener, since the metaphor relies on mutual knowledge in the conversation; 2) connecting the topic and vehicle domains in order to assist the process of comprehension; and 3) providing a basis for understanding a new concept or reconstructing the original understanding of a concept. The use of a metaphor contributes to a new understanding, which is gained by looking through the eyes of

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individuals and helping to create meanings and perspectives that are socio-culturally specific. It is worth adopting metaphorical interpretation in an attempt to understand the educator-student relationship. This is a novel approach, and one that can certainly yield some insights to help educators understand how students perceive the relationship and to enhance the relationship in order to improve the student experience as well as nurse education.

2. Previous research conducted on metaphors

Czechmeister (1994) was a pioneer scholar who, about twenty years ago, described metaphors as ‘two-edged swords’ since they are fundamental to human expression but sometimes lead to confusion, stereotyping, and stigma. The instrumental and expressive functions of metaphors can be applied in nurse education – in particular, creative use can be made of metaphors in teaching. Froggatt (1998) found that metaphors can present emotional dimensions of nurses and their experiences in hospice care. Levitt et al. (2000) invited therapists and clients to participate in a study aimed at understanding how ‘burden’ metaphors were used by clients in depression treatment therapy with good and poor outcomes throughout the whole therapeutic process. They found that the metaphor was a useful tool for highlighting therapeutic changes and that it confirmed the results of objective measurement tools. Bonner and Greenwood (2005) claimed that the metaphor can capture data at conceptual levels and add lead to in-depth understandings beyond those possible in the collecting of ordinary qualitative data. For example, one purpose of using metaphors in psychotherapy is that they can serve as a bridge connecting a client’s subjective experience and his/her clinical manifestation (Mould et al., 2010). The metaphor is also an effective tool for enhancing communication between physicians and patients in palliative care settings (Casarett et al., 2010). The results indicated that physicians who used metaphors more frequently during conversations received more positive ratings of their communication from patients.

In educational studies, metaphors have sometimes been used to identify a teacher’s self-described professional identity (Thomas and Beauchamp, 2011). They are also a powerful tool in revealing the process by which a teacher’s professional identity develops. Students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the roles of teachers have also been examined using metaphors (Wan et al., 2011). Discrepancies between the beliefs of teachers and students have been found, such as teachers thinking that they had aroused interest while no students held such a belief. Similarly, some students described teachers as authority figures, but no teachers had this thought. The above results show that discrepancies between the perspectives of teachers and students are inevitable. Therefore, to give a voice to students, it is important to uncover their perspectives on the educator-student relationship through a metaphorical lens. Using metaphors is also an excellent way to express one’s emotions, whether they are positive or negative. The metaphor is a good indicator of one’s perceptions of something, and can provide a great deal insight for therapeutic purposes (Charteris-Black, 2012).

In current nursing research, Zannini et al. (2015) collected metaphors on the essence of night work and the experiences of nurses in Italy. Blomberg and Stier (2015) examined how the Swedish news media portrayed the shortage of nurses and their working contexts. Both scholars declared that they were aware of the difficulty of translating Swedish metaphorical expressions into English. The point that the meanings of a metaphor in a particular language may not be exactly the same in another language is a thought-provoking one for those who conduct research on

collecting metaphors. Chan and Nyback (2015) used the colourful metaphor ‘A virtual caravan’ to represent internationalization without leaving home, achieved via a virtual course in intercultural communication between the students of two universities.

The metaphor ‘crossing a turbulent river by building a bridge’ was used by van der Zijpp et al. (2016) to show the interaction between managerial leaders and clinical leaders and how it affected the process of implementing urinary incontinence guidelines. This metaphor demonstrated the relational aspects of these two types of leaders. Beck (2016) analysed the language used by mothers with post-traumatic stress disorder by identifying their metaphors. These metaphors offer mothers a voice and make it easier for maternal-child nurses to better understand these traumatic experiences and to offer appropriate psychological support. White and Gilstrap (2016) analysed the metaphors used by home hospice nurses to describe their experiences of working with dying patients. Some practical implications can be drawn from these to recruit prospective home hospice nurses and enrich training programmes as needed. Sanares-Carreón (2016) used the metaphor ‘From caterpillars to butterflies’ to describe the development of evidence-based practice reform with the engagement of nurse leaders. To conclude, through images metaphors offer a way of understanding the journey from one point in time to another. Metaphors tell a story through meanings that are universal across cultures. Metaphorical representation adds novelty to descriptions of professional relationships or even makes it possible to add a new dimension to the educator-student relationship.

3. Background of the present study

In nursing education, little has been published about the power dynamics within the educator-student relationship. Teachers usually have more knowledge than their students, which leads to a power dominance over their students that can affect learning outcomes. Yet how such power dynamics are perceived by students has not received much attention in the context of nursing education. Nursing students interact with their lecturers in a campus setting and with their clinical teacher in clinical settings. The knowledge and experience that the students accumulate may shape their attitude towards patients after they graduate and receive their registered status (Donetto, 2010). The present research team conducted an educational project consisting three points of focus for research was therefore launched to study the power dynamics between educators and students. This study explores the perspectives of nursing students to shed light on the power dynamics in teacher-student relationships in the two learning contexts that do so much to shape future professional attitudes – campus settings and clinical settings. The first focus revealed nursing students’ perceptions of the power dynamics in the teacher-student relationship in their clinical placement (Chan et al., 2017a). The second focus uncovered nursing students’ perceptions of the educator-student relationship in campus learning (Chan et al., 2017a). This present paper was the third focus of the main educational study. The aim was to explore the voices of nurse students with regard to the educator-student relationship via metaphorical presentations. The teacher-student relationship is an abstract and perhaps sensitive topic for students. The students were encouraged to reflect on their own descriptions of this relationship and to use their own metaphorical terms to represent it. This approach is a reassuring one for student participants who might be reluctant to share their experiences with a group or in front of other people.

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