

## EDITORIAL

# Metaphors and metaphorical understanding

Bronwen Cowie and Jane Abbiss

A primary purpose of educational research is to provide new or different understandings of educational structures and processes. Research aims to support educators to critically explore, develop, and change educational policy and practice in ways that will encourage positive outcomes for learners, communities, and nations. In educational research related to curriculum, the use of metaphor, the construction of metaphorical understandings, and the examination of the efficacy of particular metaphors, can support critical engagement with curriculum policy and development, teaching and learning, pedagogy and educational research practices (Midgley, Trimmer & Davies, 2013). Metaphors can also assist individuals—leaders, teachers, and students—to describe how they view their roles and responsibilities within the educational system.

Metaphor is a figure of speech. The power of metaphor lies in its ability to clarify meaning in the midst of complexity (Jensen, 2006). Metaphors have what Schön (1983) classified as a “generative” quality in that they operate as a process in which new perspectives on the world come into existence. Through metaphor, people consciously and unconsciously create images, represent and symbolise ideas, and articulate understanding of phenomena or situations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphor, though, not only reflects daily lives but helps people to understand and shape their everyday realities. In articulating the role of metaphor in shaping realities, it is important to remember that metaphors are incomplete representations and reflections of phenomena or situations. They foreground and illustrate some properties of a process and obfuscate others. Focusing on metaphor highlights the importance of language in shaping realities and the discursive nature of those realities. In research relating to curriculum

development and implementation, and teaching and learning, metaphor can be used as a tool to uncover and explore educational experiences (both obvious and not so obvious), to represent and articulate new or different ways of thinking about and understanding educational and disciplinary phenomena and challenges, and to discursively shape educational realities.

There is a range of metaphors that are commonly used in daily life to represent educational experiences. The metaphor of a journey may, for example, be used to highlight processes of development. People traverse different territory and encounter challenges in their life journeys, of which schooling and experiences of curriculum are a part. The ongoing identity negotiations of students and teachers may be understood as constant journeys of becoming. Metaphors, though, are contestable. By way of example of this contestability, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) highlight the potency of a war metaphor for an argument. They invite people to imagine a culture where arguments are not understood in relation to war, a culture “where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground” and arguments are instead considered in relation to a dance metaphor, where “the participants are seen as performers and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way” (pp. 4–5). How would society be different if arguments were understood and undertaken in these terms? This question invites those involved in education to consider how education might be different if different metaphors were to be used to explain and frame educational experiences. How are particular metaphors used, for what purpose, and with what effect?

Use of metaphor to aid understanding of educational phenomena presents challenges to educationalists and educational researchers, related to the specificity and complexity of chosen metaphors. Recognising the power and limitations of metaphor in relation to understanding of learning processes, Sfard (1998) put forward two metaphors for learning: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor. These metaphors provide a means to focus attention on the implications of a focus on the individual mind and what goes “into it” and on the dialectic nature of the learning interaction. She reaches the conclusion that one metaphor is not enough, arguing for metaphorical pluralism as a protection against

theoretical excesses, and as a source of power. The suggestion is that single metaphors may oversimplify and limit understanding.

It might be argued that the predominant metaphor that underpins accountability policies in Aotearoa New Zealand and other nations where neoliberal educational policies dominate tends to be one of learning as a rather unproblematic journey with learners traversing knowledge landscapes along well-defined learning progressions, pathways, and trajectories. Readers may have their own views about whether or not policy is influenced by such a metaphorical understanding, whether this particular metaphorical understanding is helpful as an underpinning construct for policy, whether there is a more complex extended journey metaphor that might aid understanding of learning progressions, or whether there are other, pluralistic metaphors that may together be more appropriate and helpful in understanding learner trajectories and as a foundation for curriculum and assessment policy development. What this example does highlight, though, is the potential power of particular metaphors and the contestability of metaphorical understandings.

The collection in the special section serves to challenge the myth of objectivism in educational research relating to curriculum, teaching and learning, illustrating in a variety of contexts how “truths” about learners, classroom teachers, pre-service teachers and educational researchers are conditional and discursively constructed.

Meaning ... is never disembodied or objective and is always grounded in the acquisition and use of a conceptual system. Moreover, truth is always given relative to a conceptual system and the metaphors that structure it. Truth is therefore not absolute or objective but based on understanding. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 197)

In reading these articles, readers are invited to engage with the analogies and metaphors that the authors use—to consider the power of the selected metaphors in facilitating understanding and communicating ideas and also what possibilities are excluded or backgrounded by the use and promotion of particular metaphors. What other metaphor or combination of metaphors might be used to explain the educational ‘realities’ described? Which of these and what possible other metaphors may (or

may not) more accurately represent the educational phenomena and experiences of different groups, as they serve to present a different reality and reframe educational discourse? The collection provides a valuable stimulus for discussion about the use of metaphor and the ideas about teaching, learning and educational experiences with which the authors engage.

## References

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