

THE METAPHOR OF TEACHING AND TEACHERS¹

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"1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia

*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the metaphors associated with teaching and teachers, as viewed by Romanian students, preparing to become teachers themselves. The research involved 125 students enrolled on pre-service teacher training (Module one, for undergraduate level), who were asked to write an essay, titled *My best teacher ever*, in which they had to think of the qualities that make a teacher and their teaching act memorable in the mind and soul of students.*

The results were clustered into cognitive metaphors pertaining to the culturally-embedded representations of the teachers. The most frequent metaphor was that of "guiding light" and "friend". The teacher as "knowledge repository" was also present, alongside with that of "organiser", which was well praised, as students expressed the need for order and to some extent, respect, in the classroom.

The findings are in line with the humanistic approach to education which places the student in the centre of attention for the educational process.

Keywords: teaching metaphors, conceptualisation of the teacher, humanistic education.

Introduction

We are witnessing an increasing preoccupation nowadays for educational sciences and the initial and continuous professional development of educators. Apart from the academic and professional knowledge gained by teacher along their educational continuum, an important role

¹This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2785.

is also played by the deeply rooted beliefs about the role and the place of teachers and teaching in our lives and societies. Such beliefs, sometimes preconceptions, represent, according to (Richardson 1996:102), “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” and these are based on individual or collective experiences, expectations, socially and politically transmitted perceptions and attitudes towards learning and the educational ideals. They will influence, on the one hand, the horizon of expectations of the society at large towards educators, and the pedagogical, psychological mould of the future teachers.

In the analysis of teacher beliefs, an understanding of metaphors that conceptualise the image of the teacher can prove extremely useful (also c.f. Cameron, & Low 1999) as metaphors can contribute to a better understanding of the world around us. According to Oxford et al. (1998), metaphor can “enhance the subject’s understanding of educational problems and thus increase perspective-consciousness. Diverse instructional styles and curriculum theories can be simplified by showing, through metaphor, the relationship between abstract concepts and something that is more familiar, concrete and visible” (p. 5).

Addressing the same issue, Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 160-161) summarised from the specialist literature seven reasons why teachers use metaphors in accounts of learning: metaphors may help teachers to *identify for themselves what they actually experience*; metaphors may have the performance function of *adding dramatic effect* to the narrative of children’s learning told in the staffroom or in a research interview; metaphors may *express the meaning more concisely* than a prolix non-metaphorical equivalent; metaphors *invite interaction* by forcing listeners to work out the relevant resemblance between target and source domains; metaphors have a function of *organising systematic concepts* in teachers’ cultural-cognitive models of learning; some metaphors may be core clichés through which tellers *transform images into models*, which are manipulated through performance to develop critical themes; and seventh, it is possible that both the context, interpretation or narrative account organise the metaphor, as a key element of the teller’s evaluation of an event, as well as the metaphor, as a central image of learning, *organises the teacher’s interpretation of learning* and the ensuing account.

The metaphors identified by Oxford et al. (1998) in their above-mentioned research are clustered around four philosophies of education, that all, in one way or another, reflect power relations in the educational landscape. In our research, we will also concentrate on pervasive

metaphors that reflect the idea of power relationships that exist between teachers and students. From the very initial teacher-training period, carrying a strong imprint of their personal experience as pupils, respectively, as students, the teachers-to-be value to an almost absolute extent, the merits of the power exercised by the teacher in relation to the learner. Marked by these deeply engrained preconceived ideas, little resistant to the ‘allure of power’, beginning teachers let themselves carried away by the complex of superiority. This is one of the most interesting and subtle aspects of the individual constructs of the ‘didactic personality’. Especially at the beginning of their careers, young teachers display a totally unexpected rigidity and lack of creative thinking, most often resorting to the power invested in them by the cathedra, and the ensuing power distance, which raises questions as to the effectiveness of our psycho-pedagogic training during the pre-service teacher education programmes (Iordachescu 2013).

Literature Review

The analysis of metaphor has indeed proved useful in researching beliefs, meanings, behaviours, especially at the level of one group sharing common values, experiences, history and culture. Metaphors, alongside metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, represent a master trope, “a figure of speech that defines a relationship between terms” (Sapir 1977; as cited in Nelson, & Hitchon 1999: 356). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors may be defined as the understanding of one concept in terms of another, therefore abstractions, such as feelings or emotions, are typically structured through physical experiences. By and large, self-understanding represents the “search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives... The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself” (1980:333).

An understanding of how metaphors are used in the classroom setting will help us envision their effects on the process of learning and the subsequent development of children. In Vygotsky’s opinion (1962), correct understanding of metaphors equates the realisation of with “ad hoc” concepts or mental spaces activated in the educational discourse: “The relation of thought to word is not just a thing, but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process, the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as development. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect

something with something else, to establish a relationship between things”. (p.125) In this way, metaphors can contribute to the creation of shared meanings of our lives, and consequently, metaphors in the educational discourse can lead to the shaping, construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of children’s’ understanding and conceptualisation of the world. Along the same lines, Rochelle (1992: 237) pinpointed that developmental complexification of metaphors can occur over quite a short period of time as concerns a particular concept, and the roots can become rather strong and later behaviours can become salient. That is, the cognitive role of metaphor in the process of conceptualisation extends beyond the mere structuring of concepts, to the process of conceptual restructuring, the recourse to analogy in problem-solving or facilitating recall of information.

The complex weaving of teacher-student interrelations is largely the result of the preconceptions and perceptions underlying each of the participants’ conscience. The way that both teachers and students conceive themselves and the other is extremely important in understanding the educational route they follow. According to Munby (1986: 201, as cited in Thornbury 1991: 194) “one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers’ thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves”. Metaphorically speaking, concepts of power, love, journey, art, and the like are extremely instrumental in the classroom dynamics.

In order to understand the relationship between teacher and students, we need to first understand the way in which both teachers and students conceive themselves and the other. According to Munby (1986: 201, as cited in Thornbury 1991: 194) “one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers’ thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves”. In a study by Oxford et al. (1998) teachers’ metaphors in L2 teaching were clustered into a typology revolving around four perspectives of teaching, resulting 14 metaphors. In the table below they are summarized as presented by the authors (p.14):

Table 1. Typology of metaphors in the educational discourse (from Oxford 1998: 14)

<i>Social order</i>	<i>Cultural transmission</i>	<i>Learner-centred growth</i>	<i>Social reform</i>
<i>Teacher as manufacturer</i>	<i>Teacher as conduit</i>	<i>Teacher as nurturer</i>	<i>Teacher as acceptor</i>
<i>Teacher as competitor</i>	<i>Teacher as repeater</i>	<i>Teacher as lover or spouse</i>	<i>Teacher as learning partner</i>
<i>Teacher as hanging judge</i>		<i>Teacher as scaffolder</i>	
<i>Teacher as doctor</i>		<i>Teacher as entertainer</i>	
<i>Teacher as mind-and-behaviour</i>		<i>Teacher as delegator</i>	

The philosophical tenets behind this typology reflect important currents in the history of education. Therefore, metaphors in the *social order* perspective embrace the philosophy according to which, the teacher, considered as a technician, is an active actor in the process of social engineering, moulding learners for the needs of society. Metaphors in the *cultural transmission* perspective view the teacher as the utmost guardian of the wisdom that the society considers as valuable, and gradually guide the learners into this knowledge, having complete control over students' entry into the tower of knowledge. Metaphors in the *learner-centred growth* perspective start from the assumption that the teacher facilitates the full and harmonious development of the learner's inner powers. Metaphors in the *social reform* perspective revolves around the conception that the teacher can contribute to the full actualization of learners' abilities, to the promotion of culture, the communication of rich and varied experiences, the importance of individual creativity and the use of science as non-authoritarian instrument of joint social problem-solving (Oxford 1998: 7-10).

Research methodology

The aim of this article is to investigate the metaphors that Romanian teacher trainees (undergraduate students preparing to become teachers, of various disciplines, including primary and pre-school teachers) use in relation with teachers and teaching. As reference framework of analysis we used the one presented by Oxford et al. (1998), as well as some preliminary insights into Romanian students' preconceptions on the educational landscape as identified by Iordachescu (2013) and data found out by Popescu (2012) with reference to English teachers' perceptions of "good teachers".

Students were assigned an essay (including narratives) on the qualities of their best teacher, and also were asked to provide comparisons for the teacher (A good teacher is like ...) Their opinions were clustered using the same categories as those of Oxford's, as we wanted to identify the cultural differences that account for divergences from the original model.

Results and interpretation

The results we obtained reflected the undeniable influence that teacher trainees' perceptions of their former teachers and the teaching/learning act itself may have on their subsequent professional development. And indeed, the perception of the relations of power on the educational scene is crucial. The teaching act, developed along the teacher-centeredness paradigm, is still predominantly understood as manipulation, or even as taming of the learner, the pre-eminence of teachers' own means of making themselves understood and of 'subduing' the students, turns the educator into the absolute master of the above mentioned relation. The feeling of almightiness, more or less explicit in the relationship teacher – student is transposed into disproportionate rapports in exerting the roles and functions of the teacher. The teachers' self-centeredness is blatantly manifest in their focus on own convictions and representations, in the self-sufficiency and scientific and professional narcissism, in positioning themselves against contents to the detriment of objectives, to educational desiderata, arbitrarily designed to the detriment of the pupils' real learning needs. On the other hand, we are faced with the overt and/or subliminal histrionics of teachers' didactic and non-didactic behaviours, characterised by a model of megalomania (in fantasy and/or in real behaviour), an overwhelming need for

admiration/self-admiration, and more than often, a sheer lack of empathy towards the others (Iordachescu 2013: 121).

The pervading metaphors we identified were the following:

a) the teacher as master:

“My subject is the most important one!” “You just do as I say – because I say so!” “You only have to learn from my course book / lecture notes!” – other sources are unreliable.” “You made me angry – so I’ll give you a test!” “I have to be tough with my students, otherwise I’ll lose face and control in front of them.” “I prefer subdued, not so smart pupils to more intelligent and unruly ones.”

b) the teacher as despot/dictator:

“You are stupid!”, “You callous ones”, “You’re so rude”, “dumbo’s”, “You’d better shut up if you don’t know the answer”, “you’re wrong!”, “You will never pass the school leaving exam in mathematics! (Guess what – we almost all passed it!)”, “going to university is useless”, “stop eating, or you’ll never be able to get through that door”, “I can’t wait getting rid of you”, “stop laughing like a fool!”, “You’re good-for-nothing!”, “If you don’t learn, the devil’s mother will take you all!”, “If you become a teacher, the kids will eat you up!”, “you read in English like a shoe!”, “I’m sick of you! I don’t want to be your form teacher anymore!” “I can’t stand you!”, “When you’re mind breeds offspring, let me know!” “Take a look at your colleague! Why can’t you do the same? How come he/she can and you cannot?”, “No, not you, let your colleague do this. You can’t.” “Are you stupid or you just don’t understand?”, “You disappoint me!”, “I expected more from your part!”, “You are out of this world!”, “You’re a shame for this team!”, “What a blockhead you are!”, “You prepared for today as much as a peanut!”, “If you’re such a lazybones, you’d better stay at home!”, “Stop trying, you’ll never make it!”

These two fall under the typology of social order, more specifically “the teacher as hanging judge”, or “the teacher as manufacturer”. However, the resentment towards this type of educational paradigm is obvious, and the frustration of students remembering their school time is self-evident.

Nevertheless, there were many students who

At the other end of the scale, we recorded metaphors that bring forth the image of the teacher as moral support: “Well done, good grades! / good attendance!”, “you’ve got talent, keep on writing!”, “Bravo! See, you can do it, keep up the good work!”, “Congratulations!, you’re a

talented pupil!”, “You’re the only pupil who has prepared well for today!”, “Don’t worry, you’ll do better next time!”, “If you’re not prepared for today, you can answer next time!”, “You’ve done the best paper today!”, “You’re doing just fine!”, “Today you only got a 4, next time you’ll answer for a 10!”, “Believe in yourself and you’ll make it!”, “You lost a battle, not the war!”, as well as a similar one, that of the teacher as learning partner: “I’m proud of you!”, “We’ll show them all how good we are!”, “I will be by your side, no matter what!”, “This is just a great idea, I haven’t thought about it myself!” These latter two metaphors fall under the typology of both learner-centred growth – “the teacher as scaffolder” (the teacher is like “a mason”, the teacher shows you the way to follow, but leaves you the pleasure to discover it yourself, somebody who gradually makes himself “less and less necessary”) and social reform – “the teacher as learning partner”.

The metaphor “teacher as conduit” was also found, teachers representing repositories of vast knowledge, intelligent people, who can quote from any scholars, intelligent, professionally-looking, “epitome of knowledge”, who can explain everything clearly, the teacher is like “a bookcase”. The teacher was seen as a “citadel on a mountain top”, and “everybody’s eyes are laid on him, and he should never take off his teacher clothes, not even in his free time”, the teacher is like a spring of knowledge, from which good advice and new information keep flowing”. Very importantly, the teacher is the guide to our discoveries, a light / “a torch in the darkness”, the teacher is like a “candle that burns out to light the others’ path”, the teacher enlightens minds, is like a “star”, like “the sun for the other planets – the only one that ensures a much easier way to go”, the teacher is “the key to your own abode of wisdom, “a prophet that guides your steps on the right path”, “a sage that guides you to the threshold of your mind”, an endless spring, like “the sun after the rain”, “a tree in eternal bloom”, “eternal light bulb”, “a rainbow that appears when you least expect it and which lights your life”, “an alchemist of the human mind”, “apostle of knowledge”, like “a jeweller who polishes a gemstone”, “an arrow that always reaches its target – the children’s soul”. Not exactly falling under the social order category, we also came across the metaphor of a potter moulding minds and behaviours – the connotations are much more humanistic.

A very frequent metaphor was that of the teacher as “parent”, or “second parent”, “spiritual father”, which is extremely important and relevant for the Romanian culture, in which parents are cherished and revered, and used as life models, role models, idols, or maestros.

We also found the metaphor of gardener, or was even compared to a “frail, though powerful flower, in the rainfall of life, which blooms from all its soul for the others, offers itself to the point of exhaustion, bestowing colour and perfume upon the others”.

Conclusions

From the very pre-service teacher training programme during their undergraduate studies, future teachers need to become aware of the power of words used in the classroom, in particular by the teachers. Moreover, extreme attention should be paid to their general perceptions on teachers and teaching in general. In particular, the figurative language used in the classroom and outside it, with reference to the teaching act and the main actors, filled with metaphors, similes, metonymies, etc., might sometimes become problematic for the future development of the learners.

It is however, evident that teacher educators have to train future teachers in order to become more aware of the importance of metaphors in the educational classroom. To our surprise, the metaphor of the teacher as despot/dictator was prevalent in almost all the cases of the subjects interviewed. Every single subject remembered one such deprecating remark, either to him/her or to the other members of the class. It was less often found that people remembered encouraging/stimulating remarks that helped them along in their learning experiences. Moreover, the majority of the metaphorical clusters fell under the social reform category, this raising the issue of the need for a humanistic paradigm of teachers and teaching, whereby the teacher is like a family member, and at the same time, a companion, a friend and a valuable resource that inspires students in their life and careers.

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