

Metaphors as a Way to Understand Beginning Teachers' Perceptions about Classrooms

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Abstract

Classrooms are vibrant with students, teachers, tasks and pressures. They are busy places which bring before us the picture of a complex environment in which teachers are expected to play an active role in order to accomplish the instructional objectives and facilitate students' learning. Classroom presents larger than life picture of various students who differ in their abilities, socio-economic-linguistic background, interests and learning styles. The fact that many new teachers feel ill-equipped for the multifarious roles they are assigned, raises a number of interesting questions about how teachers conceptualize their classroom experiences in their contexts. The present paper attempts to analyse the role of metaphors to understand beginning teachers' classroom related experiences.

Keywords: *Beginning Teachers, Metaphors*

Introduction

Metaphors are culturally and socially defined. They can be understood as analogies which enable us to understand holistic perspective with special reference to context. They can be interpreted as abstract models of reality. In qualitative research designs, metaphors are used as a tool to gain a deeper insight into the micro-interactions between cognition and culture. Metaphors are analogies which allow us to map one experience in the terminology of another experience and thus to acquire an understanding of complex topics or new situations (VOSNIDOU & ORTONY, 1989). Metaphors are a way to elicit information about significant things. They enable us to delve deeper into persons' perceptions, belief system, values and mindset.

Objective

The present study is aimed at understanding teachers beginning teachers' perceptions about classrooms through metaphor.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was done. The data were collected from thirty Beginning Teachers (25 teachers from Government Schools and 5 teachers from Public Schools).

Tools for data collection

An open-ended question was asked, "Which metaphor would you assign to a classroom and why?" which, in turn, would unfold the beginning teachers' problems associated with the classroom (if any) and the strategies used by them to handle these problems. The assumption behind this question is to gain an insight into the ways in which beginning teachers conceptualize their classroom experience since metaphors are context-specific, which can limit meaning and interpretation if one tries to understand them without the setting / background. Therefore, the reason was asked in order to understand the rationale of choosing the metaphor.

Classroom observations were done in order to understand their classroom related problems. Interviews were also conducted with beginning teachers to gain a deeper insight into their classroom experiences.

Analysis and interpretation of Data

The analysis and interpretation of this question has been done on the basis of data integration in order to understand the context-specific nature of metaphors while corroborating the statements with the findings from the classroom observations and interviews.

The Metaphors stated by beginning teachers regarding the classroom (based on analysis of data collected from questionnaire)

The metaphors depicting classroom related problems

A few metaphors stated by beginning teachers have been presented below:

zz *'Classroom is like an animal's place where they are kept in supervision of its owner. It seems that in school, the children are forced to stay there compulsorily. As soon as they find any opportunity to escape, they run away from there as if they were in chains, they seem eager to free themselves from any boundation.'*

(Geeta, SKV I)

zz *'Classroom is like a zoo to me. As there are different students with different behaviour, there is no discipline in the class and the students behave in an uncivilized way like animals in a zoo.'*

(Reema, SKV I)

- zz *'Classroom means a place of discipline and concentration as teaching work can only take place in disciplined class.'*
(Gyan, SBV 1)
- zz *'Classroom is like a local railway coach in which students are like passengers, some are standing, some are gossiping and some sitting in a rough and tough manner. They are busy in doing useless things – fighting, making noise, arguing, walking.'*
(Chitra, SKV 1)
- zz *'Classroom is like a language training centre where I have to train students in acquiring proficiency in reading, writing and grammar as I find the grammar of Sanskrit language is systematic, well organized but difficult for the students.'*
(Arun, SV Co-ed 1)
- zz *'In this school, classrooms are not like classrooms. They are like a big hall in which all the children are gathered together, no matter whether they belong to that standard or not. Most of the students do not have even basic knowledge i.e. reading or writing skill but they are now in 6th, 7th and 10th standard.'*
(Charu, SKV 1)
- zz *'The classroom is like a dustbin to me because everyday I find the waste mid day meal lying here and there, insanitary conditions and the students are also untidy.'*
(Puneeta, SKV 5)

The metaphors showed that the beginning teachers were facing various classroom related problems. It seemed that the selection of words for classroom was shaped by ground realities in which they work. The classroom as an animal's place is indicative of the restrictions on children to stay in schools. It may appear that the school atmosphere was not conducive for sustaining students' interest and motivation to stay there for the school hours. Observational data revealed that the school lacked infrastructural facilities.

The metaphor of a classroom as 'a zoo' seemed to show that the problem of indiscipline was prevalent in the classroom. The metaphor 'a place of discipline', stated by a male teacher seemed to show his strong belief in classroom organization and management. The classroom observations were found consistent with his belief. The observational data revealed that the teacher faced the problems of truancy, indiscipline and absenteeism in SBV1 school.

The metaphor of '*a local railway coach*', as stated by one beginning teacher, revealed the problem of high teacher-pupil ratio in SKV1 school which appeared to trigger a series of problems. The teacher's statement appeared to depict the reality of an overcrowded classroom in which the students were unable to sit in a proper way. In such circumstances, the teaching-learning process appeared to be adversely affected. The students indulging in useless activities tended to indicate the wastage of their time and energy.

With the metaphor of a '*a big hall*', one teacher tended to show her concern for large class-size and low performance level of the students. It seemed to reveal that the students studying in the class lack fundamental knowledge which is required for that particular class. The interviews with the teacher corroborated her perception of classroom as she was deeply convinced that a specific level of learning must be acquired by a student before passing the class. However, she seemed to believe that no detention policy appeared to deteriorate the quality of education. The class consists of students who belong to differential abilities but most of the students lag behind in certain areas as they have been promoted to higher class due to the existing practice of 'no detention policy'.

Another metaphor stated by one teacher, classroom as '*a language training centre*' showed his student concerns. He was of the opinion that the activities of a classroom should be organized in such manner that it would facilitate the acquisition of language skills i.e. reading, writing and grammar. The data from interviews with the teacher were found consistent with his perception of a classroom. He seemed to believe that students find it hard to understand the grammar of Sanskrit language as compared to their mother tongue or Hindi language. For instance, he said that there are three tenses in Hindi and English language, while in Sanskrit language there are five tenses, out of which two tenses 'Lot Lakar' and 'Lring Lakar' are not so much used in the daily interaction. Thus, he seemed to emphasise on the language skills which need to be acquired by the students and he perceived classroom as a place to accomplish this task.

The metaphor of '*a dustbin*' was somehow quite different from the other metaphors. The metaphor held by one teacher (SKV5) is indicative of her beliefs and perceptions regarding classroom. The teacher's reaction towards insanitary conditions seemed to form her perception. The classroom observations revealed that mid day meal was not distributed in a proper manner. Moreover, the students used to scatter the midday meal which was provided to them. However, the teacher's reaction towards untidy students showed her insensitivity towards students.

The metaphors depicting the crucial role of a teacher

A few metaphors illustrating the role of a teacher have been presented below :

zz *'A place of learning in which teaching and learning activities can take place without any stress / pressure. The classroom should be organized in a manner that encourages order, participation, independence and continuous learning.'*

(Preeti, SKV 1)

zz *'Classroom is like a source of knowledge for me wherein I also learn a lot of things along with sharing of knowledge.'*

(Baljeet, SBV 1)

zz *'A new opportunity and learning space to me. I daily understand new Hindi meanings (translated into English) and new ways to improve myself and my students'.*

(Shivoham, SBV 1)

zz *'Classroom is like a garden to me where students are the small plants and teacher is the gardener. Teacher nurtures the students with care and guidance for the social, mental and physical development (complete development) of the students.'*

(Aruna, SKV 3)

zz *'A laboratory as whatever experiments I was doing on myself as well as on students, the observations I collected, helped me to follow the same or different strategies in that particular class or other. So, I directly get that result which motivates me to continue it or discontinue or change it further'.*

(Shilpa, SV Co-ed 1)

The above mentioned metaphors showed that the classroom was a learning space for the beginning teachers. The metaphors seemed to be framed while keeping in view the expected role of a teacher. It appeared that they believed that it was the duty of a teacher to bring out the hidden talent of students and facilitate their personality development.

zz *'A place for talent hunt. Teacher is required to plan learning activities according to the level of students in order to enable them to showcase their talent.'*

(Abhinav, SBV2)

- zz *'A stage for performance apart from teaching, a teacher has to motivate, guide, counsel and correct the students' behaviour'.*
(Toolika, SKV4)
- zz *'A melting pot of ideas, opinions, varied socio-economic background of personalities'.*
(Anita, SV Co-ed2)
- zz *'An entertainment channel for me as I always entertain myself when I provide them knowledge whatever I have and they listen me carefully'.*
(Kriti, SKV6)
- zz *'A field in which I have to grow the crops, some may be very fruitful, some may not be as much as others. My work is to be nurture them and bring maximum productivity'.*
(Rajni, PS1)
- zz *'A playground to me where there are different talented students who are filled with energy. The only need is to channelise their energy in the right direction. I can train them in a better way by persistent efforts'.*
(Divya, SKV1)
- zz *'A heaven to me where students are like angels'.*
(Samridhi, PS1)
- zz *'A battlefield for me as a teacher has to go there, fight all odds and win the confidence of her students by her weapons i.e. her knowledge and teaching skills'.*
(Madhu, SKV1)
- zz *'Class as a scientific lab where I try to discover students as an asset. I have chosen it because in my view, students are various elements and these various elements can be mixed up with different chemicals in the form of learning experiences and curriculum for discovering student capital'.*
(Susheela, SKV1)

The above mentioned metaphors seemed to indicate that beginning teachers were in the process of self-learning.

Discussion on Findings

In terms of the patterns that could be identified and the themes that emerged can be understood as: crucial role of a teacher, the ways by which a new teacher handles these problems. The variety of responses reflects the broad range of perceptions of a new teacher regarding classroom.

The metaphors held by beginning teachers revealed that they were facing various classroom related problems. They were found to be grappling with classroom related issues which tended to appear in their statements. Some metaphors clearly indicated their problems while other metaphors indirectly appeared to present adverse circumstances in which they were working.

Some metaphors indicated the multifarious role of a teacher. It was revealed that such metaphors were chosen by these beginning teachers who happened to be government school teachers. It may be reiterated that the persistent classroom related problems faced by the government school teachers pertained to high teacher-pupil ratio, maintaining discipline, lack of infrastructural facilities.

With examples of metaphor held at the start of a new teacher's career, I was able to see the ways used by these teachers to handle the challenges. The metaphor of a 'battlefield', 'playground', 'scientific lab', demystifies the passage of personal knowledge into professional practice. Other metaphors indicated the journey of a new teacher as a 'process of learning'. For instance, the statement (Shilpa, SV Co-ed 1) revealed her ways and means to tackle classroom related problems i.e. reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The finding is consistent with the previous researches that for beginning teachers, the first year of teaching is a period of trial and error (Grossman, 1989; Marti & Huberman 1993), a process of self-socialization (Tickle, 1991).

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