

Educational Leadership: Change Through Self Understanding

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Abstract

Tillema (1998) underlines the significance of teachers' beliefs in their professional development as they view new concepts through the lenses of their existing beliefs and do not practice new strategies unless these strategies are congruent to their beliefs. Taking lead from Tillema's research this study attempts to explore the beliefs of head teachers. To tap the belief system "Metaphor" is considered to be a powerful research tool. The essence of Metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another. This paper is based on my experience of working with heads of educational institutions in a course organized by the ICI Pakistan-British Council Management Centre on Educational Leadership in Pakistan. The core of the metaphor activity, which was just an opening activity for the course, was to facilitate the course participants to critically review their existing beliefs about educational leadership and reflect on the potential alternatives suitable to their own context. In most of the cases the metaphors selected by the head teachers depicted the notion of a 'giver', placing their colleagues/subordinates at the receiving end. The self awareness of participant's own beliefs helped them to reconceptualize the notion of educational leadership.

Key words: Educational leadership, metaphors, Beliefs, Change

Introduction

In the recent past there has been a growing realization of the significant role a head teacher can play to initiate an educational change. A number of books and articles are available on market which advocate 'guaranteed skills' and 'tricks of the trade' to become an effective manager. These books are interesting to read and may create a momentary excitement but ultimately lead to no significant change in the practice. Why is it so? Apart from other reasons one major reason is that, through 'quick fix' approach no change can take place at belief level. New "tricks" do not work if there is no change at conceptual level. The result of overemphasizing the techniques and skills in books and courses is that head teachers tend to become technicians and little room is left for creativity or reflection. Consequently such "quick fix books" and courses seem to have little effect on the quality of educational leadership.

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This situation necessitates the realization of the relationship between head teachers' beliefs and practices because a meaningful change can never take place unless head teachers are facilitated to reconceptualize the notion of educational leadership. Marland (1993) refers to this relationship by suggesting that the classroom actions of teachers are guided by internal frames of reference which are deeply rooted in personal experiences. Tillema (1988) suggests that in a teacher education programme, study of teachers' beliefs has become very important as teachers view new concepts through the lenses of their existing beliefs. This observation is true for the head teachers as well.

To have a fuller understanding and to bring a meaningful change in the educational leadership practices we need to study lives and beliefs of head teachers and the way they view themselves as a person and as a head teacher. The understanding of self is important to appreciate their perceptions about the outer world. The self according to Koveces (2005:54) "... the aspect of the person corresponding to the person's body, emotions, actions, and so on.

Inspired by this perspective the belief- practice relationship is now considered as a powerful strategy in the reconceptualization process of teachers. This view advocates that head teachers cannot become change agents unless an inner change, at belief level, takes place. It is important to note that, in the past, metaphor was considered as a linguistic device essentially used in literature and rhetoric for decorative purposes. Postman (1995), however, viewed metaphor from a different perspective by suggesting that, "A metaphor is not an ornament. It's an organ of perception. Through metaphor, we see the world as one thing or another." This view of metaphor, as a constituent of social reality, is supported by Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 4) who in their seminal work, *Metaphors we live by*, tried to unpack multiple dimensions of metaphors in terms of their nature as well as functions. According to them "The metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." Metaphor has emerged as an important tool of research in qualitative paradigm to tap the beliefs and thoughts. Buttimer quoted in Popper and Popper (1991, p. 498) claims:

A treasure of insight may be unlocked via metaphorical rather than literal rational thinking...because metaphor performs a poetic as well as conservative function in ordinary language, preserving as well as creating knowledge about actual and potential connections between different realms of reality.

In Pakistan we do come across some commonly used metaphors used in the domain of education. One metaphor is that of *clean slate* that is used for

a child suggesting that on clean slate teachers can write anything. *Empty Vessel* is another metaphor which is used to describe children in schools. Similarly *sponge* aptly describes the notion of a traditionally held “good” students who would absorb all the knowledge. These metaphors are not just linguistic devices to beautify the speech but reflect a certain mindset that negates the children’s prior knowledge or experiences. It is thus important to understand the mindsets before any initiative is taken to bring a change in them.

Context and Participants

ICI Pakistan-British Council Management Centre had organized a one day course on Educational Leadership for the head teachers and potential head teachers of schools. I acted as a resource person on this course. There were twenty participants coming from the well reputed schools of the city. Fifteen of them were head teachers whereas five were senior teachers, aspiring for head-teacher-ship. It was a one-day course where “Metaphor” activity was used just as an opening activity to tap participants’ belief system. To facilitate the process of unpacking they were given the following two questions:

What metaphor describes me best as a person? and why?

What metaphor describes me best as a leader/head teacher? and why?

Realizing that some of the participants might not have a fair idea about the term *metaphor* I explained the term with a couple of examples. The examples had nothing to do with educational context. It was done deliberately so that certain course participants should not pick the same metaphors for the sake of convenience.

The responses to the two questions required the participants to describe themselves as a person and as a leader/ head teacher by using metaphors. Before sharing the responses of the participants I would briefly discuss some of the metaphors used by the participants. These metaphors were quite useful in understanding their notions about how they view themselves as head teachers and as persons. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), “Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action” (p. 156). The reason for choosing a particular metaphor was also elicited from the participants to further clarify their perspective. These metaphors, chosen from various contexts, helped reveal participants’ own perception of a head teacher.

Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

Morgan, cited in Keys (1991, p. 436) sees use of metaphor as “a mode of analysis to see it as a basic structural form of experience through which human beings engage, organize, and understand their world.” It is interesting to note that a number of participants chose metaphors of objects of nature. For instance tree, ocean, mountain, deep sea, cloud, date palm, and flower. Similarly a large number of metaphors were chosen from the kingdom of animals, birds and insects, e.g., example horse, mother-hen, honey-bee, butterfly, pigeon, cat, lion, and tiger. Koveces (2010, p. 19) comments that “The domain of animals is an extremely productive source domain. Human beings are especially frequently understood in term of (assumed) properties of animals.” Some metaphors were based on the special role of a person, e.g., soldier, captain of a ship, mother, and judge. A couple of metaphors were man-made objects, like a mirror, and a dial of a clock.

The most frequently used metaphors were *mother* and *tree* both for protection and care. Almost all the metaphors referred to power and act of giving. However, some participants alluded to the fact that the educational leaders can also learn from others. A couple of participants chose same metaphor to describe them as a person and as leader. A large number of participants chose different metaphors to describe them as a person and as a leader but there were similarities in the characteristics. In case of a few participants the metaphors, that described them as a person and as a leader, were quite different. Let us now look at some of the chosen metaphors and rationale for their choice.

One participant chose the metaphor of *Ocean* as a leader. Describing the reasons of her choice she wrote that as a leader she thinks she is deep, calm, soothing, rich, resourceful, forceful, dependable, resilient, focused, huge, and powerful. The same participant picked the metaphor of *tree* to describe her as a person. The reasons for this choice are very interesting as she thinks that she possesses the different characteristics of tree in her personality, i.e., green, cool, shady, resourceful, comforting, yellow and sad, green and cheerful and empty/full.

Interestingly *tree* was chosen by another participant but to describe her as a leader. Explaining her choice she writes, “I am caring but quite determined in my decisions. My staff and students always feel that I have a soft corner for them. In spite of being hard I do care for them also.” The same participant used the metaphor of *mountain* to describe her as a person. She writes, “The metaphor that appropriately describes me as a person is a *mountain* as I am a very determined and focused person. When I set my mind to do a thing I don’t easily change.”

Tree seemed to be a popular metaphor with the participants. Another participant used it to describe her as a person and as a leader. According to her, like a tree, she provides shade and shelter, standing as an individual, and dependent on external factors for support. *Horse* was chosen by a participant as a metaphor to describe her best as a person and as a leader because a horse is strong yet gentle, loyal, elegant and powerful, strong-headed, and in control of things.

One participant used the metaphor of *captain of a ship* as a leader whose job is to direct, assist, guide, help in time of crises, be there always for the team members and be strength for team members. The same participant chose the metaphor of a *pigeon* as it is a symbol of peace, has a positive approach, is peace loving at all the times and handles difficult situation with calm and cool.

Deep sea was chosen by a participant to describe her as a leader. She writes, "I am a deep sea, as people trust me, can share their problems, ideas and worries and they feel relaxed and comfortable." The same person described herself as a person in this way, "I feel that way because I think whatever I am, I am, even if I try to hide my feelings, I cannot, it comes on my face. People come to know from my expressions if I am happy or worried."

One participant chose the metaphor of a *soldier* as a leader as he finds himself committed, loyal and hardworking, sensitive to the success of the cause, and expects loyalty and hard work from comrades, willing to sacrifice being single minded in the achievement of goals, not liked by everyone, easily overlooked. This participant chose the metaphor of *cloud* to describe himself as a person. As he thinks he is widely traveled, caring/provides shade, and can be severe like a storm cloud.

Another participant chose *mother* as a metaphor to describe her as a leader. Describing the reasons for her choice she wrote that like mother she empathizes, guides, stretches, nourishes, cares for reward/admonish, learns from (as she learnt computer skills from her children) and does all sorts of odd jobs (like a housewife/mother). To describe herself as a person the same participant chose the metaphor of *mirror*. Justifying her choice of metaphor she writes, "I absorb, am affected by and reflect my environment, have clarity of vision and thought, am able to see finer details, am 'wipe clean' can easily erase any blemish on the surface – forgive and forget mistakes – start afresh.

Horse was another metaphor picked by a participant as she thinks, like a horse, she is hardworking, faithful, provides comforts to others, dutiful. This participant chose *dial of a wall clock* as it keeps moving itself and others all the time.

Another participant chose animal metaphors to describe her as a person and as a leader. She chose *honey-bee* to describe her as a leader because she

organizes, manages and governs the work in well organized manner. This participant picked metaphor of *cat* to describe herself as a leader. Giving rationale for her choice she writes, “A cat has a very similar qualities of a mother. A mother is the gift of God who not only guides, protects, nourishes and takes care of her children but she trains them to be a good person of the society.”

One head teacher used the metaphor of *nurse maid* to describe herself as a leader. She thinks that she holds this position to help, motivate, guide, empathize, soothe, and be available. The same participant used the metaphor of *whirlwind*. Giving the rationale of her choice she writes, “I am impatient and impulsive. I like to carry others with me, however, I am often in error because I push things/people.

Another participant picked *tiger* to describe herself as a head teacher. Explaining her choice she writes, “As a head teacher I think of myself as a tiger who is in control, alert, relaxed, giving his family the protection they need. Letting the cubs play and develop yet being fully aware of their each and every need. A tiger has the respect of all other animals yet kills only for food and not for play. So I do my job and take all the problems of my students on myself.”

Another participant thinks that, as a leader, she is strong, hardy, and energy giver. So she chose the metaphor of *date palm*. As a person the same participant considers herself as a protector and provider. So she chose the metaphor of *mother hen*.

Judge was chosen by a participant to describe him as a leader. She considers her job to balance the needs of teachers and children, to guide, to direct and to think calmly. The same participant picked the image of *honey bee* to describe himself as a person because she is well organized.

One participant chose the metaphor of *rock* to describe her as a leader and as a person because she thinks that she is steady, solid, dependable, and resilient. Another participant chose *flower* to describe herself as a leader and as a person. Because of “its blossom, its fragrance, beauty, maturity and capacity- because it generates—beauty, life hope, power and care, from its existence – but will not always be! Part of a big tree”

Another participant described herself as a leader in these words, “I am Hercules. I am faced by a new challenge everyday and called upon to seek on that hidden strength that I was not aware of at the time. I have to give; I have to bend. I have to seek, to lift the world on my shoulder a little longer, attack or approach a task as a duty – a marathon to be achieved and have the humility to wonder if I have the ability to do it. I have to learn how to do.” Now let us see how the same participant describes herself as a person, “I am a brook. I originated in the haunts of love and true values and sallied forth to run through the valleys and mountains, tumbling along the rocky bed and rolling smoothly where the going was good. I imbibe and garner from the

banks I meet, and I give a gift to those who would drink from me.

Guide/trekker was used as a metaphor by a participant to describe herself as a leader because she thinks she is orderly, temperate, considerate, and brave. This participant picks the metaphor of an *adventurer* as a person because she thinks that she is loving, friendly, daring, active, looking for new ideas. Another participant chose the metaphor of *Judge* as a leader because he believes in balancing and needs requirements of students, teachers and parents. The same participant considers himself a *lion* as a person because he is in control, selfish, lazy when he wants to be, courageous, and caring.

While using the “Metaphor” as a research strategy I came across certain challenges. The first challenge was that some course participants were not familiar with the notion and use of ‘metaphor’. So I had to explain the term with a couple of examples. The examples had nothing to do with educational context. It was done deliberately so that certain course participants should not pick the same metaphors for the sake of convenience.

Another challenge was that the partisans coming from diverse backgrounds mentioned the metaphors which could be justified from their own cultural associations and background. Referring to the uniqueness of cultural metaphors Kovecs (2005) comments, “There may be some conceptual metaphors that appear to be unique to a given language/culture. These require that both the source and the target be unique to the culture” (p. 68).

Another potential danger was that the participant might get hooked to this strategy and metaphor become a confining device for them. Sfard (1994, p. 47) alludes to a similar challenge by suggesting, “On the one hand, it is what brings the universe of abstract ideas into existence in the first place; on the other hand, however, ‘the metaphor we live by’ put obvious constraints on our imagination and understanding.” For that I shared with the course participants that metaphor is just *one* way and *not the only* way to understand a concept.

Conclusion

The core of the metaphor activity, which was just an opening activity for the course, was to facilitate the course participants to critically review their existing beliefs about educational leadership and reflect on the potential alternatives suitable to their own context. It is important that the metaphor activity gave the participants an opportunity to understand their self as a person and professional at a conscious level. This awareness is the first important step towards reconceptualization and exploring ways for bringing changes at the belief level. The change linked with the belief level seems to be more meaningful and sustainable. The research also saw a potent link between professional and personal identities of educational leaders and their mutual

impact on each other. Some ways that helped course participants reconceptualize were pair work, group work, brainstorming, debriefing session, cooperative learning, and presentations. These tasks and activities helped the participants to reconstruct their beliefs and look for fresh metaphors that could represent their transformed beliefs. The research studies in education are no more just concerned with identifying causal links between equipping head teachers with skills and improved leadership practices, but by attempts to see into the minds of head teachers, to document their thinking and knowledge. The use of metaphors helped the course participants to revisit their old notions and beliefs, critically reflect on them, and explore the alternative options available to reconstruct their beliefs. The study has an important implication for programme for educational leadership that a meaningful change is not possible unless it is linked with beliefs of the practitioners.

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