METAPHORS AND THE TEACHER’S PROFESSION

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Metaphors, Teacher’s profession, Subject matter-centred approach, Learner-centred approach, Teacher-centred approach

1. Introduction

Professor Marc Spoelders was a truly inspiring teacher in educational theory, and above all an eminent language educationalist. He cherished language as a precious asset. He liked to play with language. He loved verbal (and teasing) games with his students. First as an aesthete, in second instance as a scientist he examined the role of language in education and in parenting.

I will never forget the first article we read during his lectures: ‘Metaphors in education’. This article was written in 1980 by Fred Van Besien, then a research assistant of professor Spoelders. That characterized the professor: He had no need to show off his own writings. Professor Spoelders preferred being a ‘signpost’ (a metaphor!). His ‘educational eros’ was not focused on his own person, but on sharing his passion with others: the passion for language education, for education tout court.

Fred Van Besien later became one of the pioneers of Flemish applied linguistics. Unfortunately, he died shortly after his retirement. A Festschrift, following Van Besien’s retirement, contained a Preface by professor Spoelders, titled: ‘To Panama!’ (De Schryver & Vlasselaers, 2007). This humorous exclamation was a metaphor, again, meant to express: ‘We’re out of here!’ or ‘Up to other places!’’. For Professor Spoelders, ‘To Panama!’ came too soon. Now he has crossed the Panama Canal, as if it were the River Styx, to reach the Elysian fields where blissful language educationalists hope to find... eternity.
As a tribute to the professorate, but also to the person of Marc Spoelers, I would like to report on a small and modest explorative study carried out with the help of my students (future teachers in primary school), on metaphors which teachers nowadays use to describe their teaching. Since that first article of Professor Spoelers’ lectures, metaphors continue to fascinate me.

2. What are metaphors?

Etymologically the word ‘metaphor’ derives from the Greek ‘meta’ (across) and ‘pherein’ (to carry) (Ortony, 1975). The Greek philosopher Aristotle already referred to ‘metaphors’ in his works Poetica (van der Ben & Bremer, 2004, 69 and 148) and Rhetorica (Bos, 2003, 123). To understand the meaning of the word 'metaphor' exactly, Van Besien refers in his article to the classical view of Ivor Armstrong Richards (cf. The philosophy of rhetoric, published in 1936 by Oxford University Press). The latter used the terms ‘tenor’ for the subject of a metaphor (today usually called ‘topic’; cf. Van Besien, 1980, 294), ‘vehicle’ for the image or analogy in terms of which the topic is presented, and 'ground' for the common part of the two. For example, in 'the teacher is a shepherd': teacher is the topic, shepherd the vehicle and the common feature is protective care and guidance.

Thus, a metaphor triggers a comparison. But the question arises whether a metaphor is a comparison in the sense that the metaphor simply can be forced in the form a = b? Or is a metaphor 'richer' than a comparison? You might say and explain: ‘This teacher is like a shepherd: he gives everything of himself so selflessly for the kids.’ There the comparison stops. But when you just say: ‘This teacher is a shepherd’, then your interlocutor can continue to interpret for longer time, and that commitment may turn out to be far less selfless (1).

3. Why metaphors?

Through a small explorative research we wanted to find how teachers today characterize their own teaching. In order to know that, we questioned teachers who coached our prospective student teachers during their internship in primary schools. We asked these teachers to indicate – in their view – the most essential elements of the so-called
didactic triangle (see below), but also to express their views on teaching by choosing a metaphor. Why?


The vividness thesis assumes that metaphors provide more 'lively' representations, which for example – according to Ortony – will facilitate memorization and learning in general. Also Van Besien (1992; 1980, 296) argues in favour of the use of metaphors in the classroom, but likewise, he points out that some caution is necessary for the reason that metaphors, because of their attractiveness and persuasion, could lead to a decrease in critical thinking and in properly reasoned arguments.

The second argument, the so-called inexpressibility thesis, shows that metaphors may help to verbalize thoughts that are too complicated to express in simple sentences.

Finally, the compactness thesis argues that metaphors make it possible to convey a whole list of features in just one or two words, while otherwise it would require a large number of words.

It is obvious that mainly the arguments of inexpressibility and compactness defined our choice of metaphors in the survey of the teachers. We did not want teachers to waste their precious time responding to complex questions, searching the right words and phrases. Likewise we were looking for a more ‘compact’ way to obtain the teachers’ views on teaching, so that further research would be easier.

4. The didactic triangle

As mentioned, we not only asked teachers to choose a metaphor, but also to indicate the most essential elements – in their opinion – of the classic didactic triangle. In this way, we wanted to know their view regarding teaching from a more – ‘theoretical’ – perspective in order to identify a link between that view and the chosen metaphor.
The didactic triangle has three vertices: the learner (the student), the subject matter and the teacher. It is a simple representation (Figure 1) showing the relationships between the basic components of education and learning:

![Figure 1: Didactic triangle](image)

In French-speaking educational literature this presentation is mainly used by Jean Houssaye (2000). Houssaye has also tried to add some dynamism to the presentation by naming the sides of the didactic triangle (Figure 2):

![Figure 2: Didactic triangle by Jean Houssaye](image)
Learning refers to the relationship learner-subject matter, teaching to the relationship between teacher and subject matter, and education to the relationship teacher-learner (when using the word ‘education’ we refer more specifically to the concept of “Bildung”, a process of both personal and cultural maturation). Winking at the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Houssaye further notes that in a triangular relationship two elements are always placed above a third. Then the third element is given the role of the dummy or dead person (‘la place du mort’) and is forced to play the fool one (‘le fou’). If someone is primarily engaged in teaching (see the relationship teacher – subject matter), they neglect the relationship with the learner: in that case the learner will show unwelcome behaviour and – now and then – express feelings of dislike towards the teacher. If one is mainly concerned with learning (see the relationship learner – subject matter), they neglect the relationship with the teacher; then the teacher plays the fool... Finally, if the focus is mainly on education (teacher-learner), this is at the cost of the relationships with the subject matter.

The didactic triangle as suggested by Houssaye offers us a simple theoretical framework (i.e. different from the image-rich metaphor) to describe views regarding the teacher’s profession. However, it is difficult to accept the thesis of Houssaye that a third component should always be given ‘the place of the dead’. For example, does he not underestimate the mediating role of the teacher in the learning process, i.e. the mediating role of the teacher in the relationship learner-subject matter? (cf. Cotton, in press). Therefore, for our review we allowed the teachers not only to choose one or two components of the didactic triangle as being the most essential, but also to choose all three of these (see below).

Sometimes, the didactic triangle is used to describe the historical evolution of teaching. Thus, in his online course General didactics (2003-2005) Paul Timmermans distinguishes three stages in the evolutionary history of didactics:

- The pre-scientific stage of teaching when teaching was characterized by an emphasis on subject knowledge (and a master teaching ex cathedra).
- The ‘old’ teaching of Herbart and his followers for whom the didactic approach of the teacher was the most important (Johann Friedrich Herbart is considered one of the founders of the ‘Pädagogik’ or educational theory as an academic discipline from the beginning of the nineteenth century).
- The ‘vom Kinde aus’ pedagogy when the self-activity of the learners was considered the basis of all learning processes (the so-called ‘Reformpädagogik’ or ‘Progressive Education Movement’ – in all its diversity – from the end of the 19th century).

Of course, Timmerman’s description is a strong oversimplification of a complex historical evolution (see the contribution of Meijer in this special issue in honour of Professor Spoelders, that highly nuances the relationship between Herbart and Herbartianism). Even today these three views are, however, yet to be found in education, although they are now referred to by other terms (see e.g. Jones-Smith, 2011, 212):

- The subject matter-centred approach with a strong orientation towards information-transition. The teacher is viewed as a subject matter expert.
- The teacher-centred view which emphasizes the planning and execution of teaching. The teacher is primarily an instructor, a methodological expert.
- The student-centred approach is mainly connected with the notion of the self-activity of the learners. Teachers only should facilitate learning and create a powerful learning environment.

The first two views – the subject matter- and the teacher-centred approach – were strongly criticized by educators in the 1990s. In contrast, the student-centred view was promoted very powerfully. For example, regarding the Dutch-speaking regions: in the Netherlands “New Learning” was seen as the new Messiah (Simons et al., 2000); in Flanders (northern part of Belgium) the “Experiential Education” approach was born (Laevers et al., 1996). Later on however, the impact of these approaches also diminished because that student-centred view turned out to be not the only true one as well (see e.g. Chall, 2000; Niemiec et al., 1996; van der Werf, 2005).
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Probably disappointed, supporters of the student-centred approach then tried to prove that their view is the only right one, giving that view a more 'scientific' basis: they relied on the so-called constructivism. Constructivism is an educational theory that views pupils as constructing their own reality and so building their own knowledge and skills. But, over the last few years much criticism has been levelled at that constructivism. For instance, according to Paul Kirschner et al. (2006), the theory of constructivism is mistakenly considered a theory of teaching methodology. Constructivism explains the way a student learns (i.e. a subject of epistemology or educational psychology) but not the way knowledge and skills should be taught (i.e. a subject of the theory of teaching methodology).

5. Research design

The research data were collected at the beginning of the 2013-2014 academic year by 2nd year students of the integrated teacher education programme for primary school, at VIVES University College, Torhout Campus, Belgium. During their two weeks internship in primary schools the students questioned 133 teachers. These primary schools (i.e. a 3 year Kindergarten and then a 6 year elementary school) were located across the Belgian province of West-Flanders and included urban and rural regions. The following data were collected:

- The stage in which the teacher teaches: Kindergarten (2;5-5 years old pupils) / 1st stage of the elementary school (6-7 years old) / 2nd stage of the elementary school (8-9 years old) / 3rd stage of the elementary school (10-11 years old).
- The number of years of teaching: less than 1 year / 1 to 10 years / 11 to 20 years /21 to 30 years / more than 30 years.
- Their sex: male / female.
- In their opinion, the most essential component (s) of the teaching process (see the didactic triangle): especially the teacher / especially the subject matter / especially the learner / especially the teacher AND the subject matter / especially the teacher AND the learner / especially the learner AND the subject matter / the teacher AND the learner AND the subject matter.
- A self-chosen metaphor to characterize their teaching (the teachers were asked to finish the statement ‘A teacher is (like)...’).
We asked the teachers about the stage in which they teach because, obviously, we can expect teachers of lower classes to select another metaphor and view than teachers of higher grades. For example, we might assume that teachers of younger children will emphasize more the 'caring' role of a teacher, and teachers of older pupils more their 'teaching' role (i.e. teacher as an instructor).

Also the years of experience may play a role. Perhaps experienced teachers will focus more on the subject matter, and younger teachers more on the learner. That could be the result of a shift from a more subject matter- or teacher-centred approach in the training of teachers, to a more learner-centred view in teacher education today. But also the opposite could be true: older teachers may master their subject matter so well that it gives them more scope to focus on the learners, while younger teachers might have to familiarize themselves with the subject matter first.

Gender may be another factor influencing the choice of metaphor and view on education: a female teacher might be more learner-focused and choose a more 'caring' metaphor (e.g. the teacher is (like) a mother). The male teacher might be more focused on the subject matter and choose a metaphor in which the teacher is, for instance, rather a guide helping the learner to acquire the subject matter.

To facilitate the analysis of the relationship between metaphor and view, we have classified all metaphors into a number of categories. However, these categories were not established in advance. We categorized the metaphors afterwards with the help of some experienced teachers (see below).

The data from the study were finally analyzed by a third-year student in the context of her bachelor paper. There are no complicated statistical analyses (correlations, factor analysis, etc.), which are not expected of student teachers of primary school. Relationships are looked for e.g. through simple crosstabs, and are interpreted very cautiously.
6. Results and some interpretations

6.1 Different kinds of metaphor

We collected about 131 metaphors. Five teachers who also completed the questionnaire, were chosen at random. With their help we categorized the metaphors as follows:

- Parent metaphors such as: a mum who takes care of her children; a good father;...
- Mother animal metaphors such as: a lioness looking after her cubs; a hen taking care of her baby chicks; a mother swan tucking her young under her wings; …
- Growth metaphors such as: a gardener taking care of his plants; a tree which bears good fruit each year;...
- Travel metaphors such as: a captain at the helm; a guide in the big world; a compass...
- Design metaphors such as: a sculptor; an architect; the cement between the different building blocks that children need;...
- Trust metaphors such as: an anchor; a pillar; a rock; a guardian;...
- Superman metaphors such as: a centipede; an octopus...

Of course, the process of categorizing was not obvious. As we have mentioned, metaphors are poly-interpretable. We are conscious that the categories are quite debatable. It might e.g. be suggested to put the parent metaphors and the mother animal metaphors together. Nevertheless, we have kept them apart because we felt the choice of a mother animal metaphor implies that the teacher cannot replace the role of the (human) parents. The care of an animal parent is not identical to the care of a human parent. For instance, the care of most animals for their young is of short duration in comparison to the childcare of human parents. Similarly the care of the teacher for the pupils is of short duration.

There was much less discussion on the category of growth metaphors: such a metaphor expresses the view that the teacher strongly believes in the growth potential of the pupils, as long as they can develop in a favourable (learning) environment.
Travel metaphors emphasize much more the final destination (cf. the educational goals), as well as the ‘guiding’ role of the teacher on the way to that final destination (cf. the teacher as a guide). From another perspective, it is also possible that the meaning of travel metaphors has more to do with the learning process during the travelling itself, i.e. without a specific final destination. As John Dewey said: “If it is better to travel than to arrive, it is because travelling is a constant arriving” (Hickman & Alexander, 1998, 323). But, in this context as well, the teacher still has a guiding role.

In comparison to the travel metaphors, the so-called design metaphors put even greater emphasis on the initiative of the teacher: he or she ultimately defines the whole learning and formation process, of course taking into account the characteristics of the ‘material’.

By choosing a so-called trust metaphor the teacher wants to make it clear that teaching presupposes a fundamental trust between teacher and learner, as well as an unconditional concern for the learner: the teacher is an anchor, a rock, a guardian...

Finally, there are the superman metaphors. Also here the idea is clear: teachers today are expected to realize so much that they can be compared, for example, to a centipede.

### 6.2 Metaphor choice and stage

We first look at the differences in metaphor choice compared to the year which the teacher teaches (table 1: n = number of metaphors in absolute terms; number of chosen metaphors in %; the highest percentages in bold and italic):
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Table 1: Comparison of metaphor choice and stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Primary school (n=131)</th>
<th>Kindergarten (n=34)</th>
<th>Elementary school (n=97)</th>
<th>1st st. (n=41)</th>
<th>2nd st. (n=28)</th>
<th>3rd st. (n=28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother animal</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table above we can deduce that the most commonly-used metaphor type by primary school teachers, is the travel metaphor (27%). However, if we separate the metaphors of Kindergarten teachers from those of the elementary school teachers (1st stage, 2nd stage AND 3rd stage), we see a remarkable difference: most elementary school teachers opt for travel (33%) or trust metaphors (23%), while Kindergarten teachers select rather a growth (26%), mother animal or trust metaphor (in both cases 21%). As mentioned, one would actually expect Kindergarten teachers to focus much less on (learning) goals but primarily on the children’s development (cf. growth metaphors) in a warm and safe environment (cf. mother animal and trust metaphors). Elementary school teachers especially keep in mind their guiding role (cf. the travel metaphor) or ensure (cf. the trust metaphor) that the students can reach the (learning) goals as much as possible (cf. the travel metaphor). This analysis is more significant with the teacher teaching in a higher stage: 24% of the 1st stage teachers opts for the travel metaphor, in the 2nd stage 29% of the teachers chooses this metaphor, and in the 3rd stage even half of the teachers (50%) make this choice!

It is remarkable that very few teachers opt for a design metaphor (3% in elementary school and 9% in Kindergarten). Does this metaphor type focus too much on the initiative and the ‘modelling’ role of the teacher, which is not really appreciated by educators and policy in the current educational context? And may that be the reason why teachers do not dare to choose this metaphor?
Finally, we notice that the scores for the superman metaphors are rather variable. If this tells us something about the workload, may we conclude that the most demanding task is assigned to 2nd stage teachers (13%)?

6.3 Metaphor choice and sex

Also gender may play a role in the choice of a typical metaphor for the teaching profession. Let us look at the results (in %) in table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Male (n=16)</th>
<th>Female (n=115)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother animal</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of metaphor choice and sex

Contrary to our expectations, we find that both the majority of male and female teachers opt for a travel metaphor (31% and 26% respectively). We had expected a clearer difference, in the sense that female teachers would choose metaphors which are more care-centred: parent, mother animal, growth and trust metaphors. Yet, with the female teachers we can identify a greater spread in these ‘care’ metaphors: 22% opts for a trust metaphor, 15% for a growth metaphor, 13% for a parent metaphor, and 11% for a mother animal metaphor (a lioness looking after her cubs; a hen taking care of her baby chicks, …). No male teacher chooses a mother animal metaphor; after the travel metaphor, male teachers especially choose growth metaphors. This is perhaps because they fit more closely with the travel metaphors (they are referring more to learning as a development process).

6.4 Metaphor choice and career

As a teacher has more substantial teaching experience, his view regarding the teaching profession is likely to evolve. What can we
conclude from our research on this point? Let us examine table 3 (results in %):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>&lt;1 year (n=4)</th>
<th>1-10 (n=28)</th>
<th>11-20 (n=46)</th>
<th>21-30 (n=34)</th>
<th>&gt;30 years (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Comparison of metaphor choice and career

Indeed, we notice some differences. However, caution is required because the number of respondents is sometimes very low; there are only four teachers with less than one year’s experience. If we look at the categories of teachers with a career of one to more than 30 years, we can perhaps talk of an evolution, in the sense that teachers with limited teaching experience (1 - 10 years) are more likely to focus on their guiding role or on achieving the educational learning goals (cf. travel metaphors: 39%) while teachers after 10 years of teaching tend to provide more trust metaphors (respectively 28% and 26%). Teachers with a teaching experience of more than 30 years apparently show even more than before their paternal / maternal feelings (parent metaphors: 28%).

6.5 Metaphor choice and view of the theory

Metaphors that teachers use to characterize their teaching reveal something about their educational view. Caution is needed, because it is obviously never entirely certain whether the metaphor is interpreted as intended. That is why we also asked for the teacher’s view of the theory of teaching. For this we used the so-called didactic triangle.
These are the results:

- None of the 131 teachers chooses a view in which the curriculum is considered to be the most essential factor (i.e. the so-called subject matter-oriented approach). Similarly, no one chooses a view in which both teacher and subject matter are the most important components.
- Only one teacher chooses a pure teacher-centred approach.
- According to four teachers both learner and subject matter are the most essential components.
- A pure learner-centred approach is selected by five teachers.
- A view in which both teacher and learner are the most essential factors, is chosen by 13 teachers.
- For the largest group of teachers, specifically 108 teachers (i.e. 82% of the total group), both the learner, the teacher and the subject matter are essential components.

Given that most views are selected by very small numbers of teachers, we confine our comparison of the choice of metaphors to the two largest groups (table 4: results in absolute terms):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Both teacher and learner (n=13)</th>
<th>Both teacher, learner and subject matter (n=108)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother animal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Metaphor choice and view of the theory of teaching

We can conclude that both groups mainly choose a travel metaphor. The results of teachers with a view in which teacher and learner are equally important, are apparently a little more pronounced, while the spread is much greater in the other group (i.e. both teacher, learner and subject matter are equally essential). For example, many
teachers of the last group also provide growth (n=20) and trust metaphors (n=23). Very few teachers of the latter group choose a design metaphor (n=4).

6.6 Discussion

Some expectations have been met, others have not. For instance, we expected that there would be a clearer difference between metaphors chosen by male teachers and metaphors chosen by female teachers. However, both groups mainly chose travel metaphors. With female teachers, however, there is a greater spread in the sense that they also choose various 'care metaphors': parent, mother animal, growth and trust metaphors. After the travel metaphors male colleagues particularly choose for growth and trust metaphors, much less for parent metaphors, and not at all for mother animal metaphors.

When we link the choice of metaphors with the duration of the teacher’s career, we can see a difference. Novice teachers have been found to develop mainly mother animal metaphors, teachers with average experience choose more travel and trust metaphors, and teachers near the end of their career provide more parent metaphors. These findings have also been confirmed by more scientific studies (see e.g. Leavy et al, 2007; Martinez et al, 2001).

Likewise, the stage in which teachers teach seems to play a role in the selection of a metaphor. Teachers of higher stages mainly opt for a travel metaphor, more than their colleagues do from Kindergarten and from first stages of elementary school. So, we may conclude that teachers in the higher years focus more on the (learning) goals or on the learning process itself, and on the guiding / accompanying role of the teacher (the teacher as a guide).

Almost all teachers (n=108, or 82%) opt for a ‘theoretical’ view of education in which both the learner, the teacher and the subject matter are just as necessary. In other words, they do not opt for a pure learner-centred (constructivist) approach, nor for a subject matter-centred view, and neither for a teacher-centred approach. For most teachers education is to be focused both on learning (learner-subject matter), teaching (teacher-subject-matter) and ‘Bildung’ (teacher-learner) at the same time, whereas for instance some education experts still argue for an uniquely learner-centred approach (see e.g. the conference of Wim Van den Broeck, professor at the Faculty of Psychology & Educational Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel: http://www.klasse.be/leraren/video/de-kracht-van-onderwijzen/).
We also have to give consideration to the fact that there does not seem to be a clear link between the most common ‘theoretical’ view regarding education (i.e. both teacher, learner AND subject matter are equally essential) and the chosen metaphors. Most teachers with that view choose a travel metaphor in which the three components are indeed equally essential (n=26): the ‘pupil’ is seen as a traveller, ‘knowledge’ as what the pupil learns during the travelling (conceivably with the intention to reach predefined learning goals as the ‘final destination’), the ‘teacher’ as a guide, supervisor or companion. But an almost equally large group of teachers with that ‘theoretical’ view (pupil AND teacher AND subject matter) choose a trust metaphor (n=23), i.e. a metaphor implying an approach that refers more to the relationship teacher-learner, while the subject matter plays a lesser prominent role; the same applies to the teachers who choose a ‘caring’ metaphor: growth (n=20), parent (n=15) or mother animal metaphors (n=12). In other words, it is peculiar how many teachers have a view regarding education with emphasis on both the teacher, the learner AND the subject matter, but at the same time choose a metaphor in which the subject matter remains in the background. Why? A question that can lead to an interesting debate...

6.7 Epilogue

When writing this article, I was often wondering which metaphor Professor Marc Spoelders would choose. I thought of a kind of Cupid, shooting magic arrows into the hearts of the students to stir up their passion for the ‘métier’. But, unlike Cupid, who is usually presented as a small chubby boy, Professor Spoelders had an imposing appearance. So I looked for another metaphor.

Perhaps Professor Marc Spoelders would embrace a metaphor representing the teacher in the first place as a ‘homo estheticus’, someone who unselfishly enjoys his profession. Indeed, during his whole career Professor Marc Spoelders tried to express that unselfish pleasure in pedagogy, and to stir up that attitude in others – primarily in his students. Thank you so much, Professor Spoelders!

Notes

(1) About these (and other) issues several theories have been developed. The most important are: the Interaction Theory by Max Black (1979), the Speech Act Theory by John Searle (1975) and the
Metaphors and the teacher’s profession


(2) Thanks to Agnes Gevaert, third-year student of BALO (bachelor elementary education) at VIVES University College, Torhout Campus, Belgium (academic year 2014-2015).

**References**


This small explorative study, in honour of Professor Marc Spoelders, focuses on the beliefs of teachers about their profession. During their internship, second-year students of primary school teacher training (VIVES University College, Torhout, Belgium) questioned 131 teachers of primary education, i.e. Kindergarten for 3 years and
then elementary school for 6 years. To investigate the teacher’s beliefs the students asked them to provide a metaphor characterizing the profession of a teacher. The most commonly-used metaphor type by primary school teachers, is the *travel metaphor* such as: a captain at the helm, a guide in the big world, a compass… Of course there are differences in metaphor choice compared to the year which the teacher teaches, to their gender, to their teaching experience, and to their view of the theory of teaching (cf. the so-called subject matter-centred, teacher-centred or learner-centred approach). At the end of the article we wonder which metaphor Professor Marc Spoelders would choose…

Résumé

A titre d’honneur pour le professorat, mais surtout pour la personne que le Professeur Marc Spoelders était, je veux rapporter ici d’une recherche exploratoire qui a été faite à l’institut VIVES par des étudiants de la deuxième année de formation de maîtres d’école primaire (ville de Torhout, Belgique). La recherche portait sur les convictions que les enseignants ressentent par rapport à ce qui est essentiel dans leur profession. A l’occasion de leur stage, les étudiants ont interrogé 131 personnes, c.à.d. des enseignants de l’école maternelle (enfants de 2;5 à 5 ans) et des instituteurs de l’école élémentaire (de 6 à 12 ans). Pour pouvoir examiner les convictions de ces enseignants, les étudiants leur ont demandé de choisir une métaphore, afin de caractériser leur propre profession. Le groupe de métaphores le plus ‘populaire’ était celui qui fait allusion au “voyage”: l’enseignant étant un capitaine au gouvernail, un guide, une boussole… Naturellement les métaphores choisies diffèrent selon l’année dans laquelle on enseigne, le sexe de l’enseignant, son ancienneté, et aussi selon son opinion sur la théorie pédagogique (ou bien centrée sur le maître, sur l’apprenant, sur la matière, ou bien sur deux ou trois de ces éléments en même temps). A la fin de l’article je me demande quelle métaphore le Professeur Marc Spoelders aurait choisie lui-même.

Samenvatting

Als ode aan het hoogleraarschap en vooral aan de persoon van Professor Marc Spoelders wil ik verslag uitbrengen van een kleinschalig verkennend onderzoek naar hoe leraren van vandaag het leraarschap zien. Tijdens hun stage hebben tweedejaarsstudenten van de lerarenopleiding lager onderwijs (VIVES Hogeschool, campus
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