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Conceptualizations of Learning and the Every Student Success Act

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Abstract

A chasm appears to have emerged between the conceptualizations of learning held by researchers in education and those held by education policymakers. This may be reflected in and impacted by the language in and around education policy and the conceptual system from which such language arises. This study investigated underlying metaphors in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and policy documents. Findings reveal this policy to be grounded in the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning and the *business/management* metaphor of education, with no indication of the *construction* metaphor of learning in which much educational research is grounded.

Aim

A problem potentially exists if the metaphors of learning upon which education policies are built are incompatible with the metaphors of learning held by educational researchers. This study investigated the metaphors in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) and the surrounding policy analysis in order to describe the underlying metaphors, and to determine whether a disconnect exists between these metaphors and those held by many educational researchers.

Problem and Purpose

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) replaces the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. ESSA was crafted to address dissatisfaction with NCLB. The intended outcomes of ESSA were to ensure that states set high standards, to maintain accountability, to empower local decision-makers, to preserve annual assessments, to expand access to high-quality preschool, and to establish new resources to test and replicate effective strategies. These outcomes were similar to those intended of NCLB, but ESSA shifts authority to states. ESSA retains the NCLB emphasis on standardization and testing.

Many researchers in education and related fields have conceptualizations of learning grounded in a *construction* metaphor of learning: meaning is individually, collaboratively, and collectively constructed (e.g., Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). People outside these domains tend to have conceptualizations of learning grounded in a *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning which sees learning as the transfer of those knowledge from authoritative sources such as teachers and books into the minds of learners. This metaphor is the dominant metaphor in society today (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009).

Conceptualizations are informed by worldviews and paradigms (Kearney, 1984), as well as metaphors and analogies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Hofstadter & Sander, 2013). For instance, a person with a *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning may tend toward learning practices involving lectures, drill-and practice, and tests, and use terminology such as acquire, achievement, assessment, outcomes, evidence, and standards (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). A person with a *construction* metaphor of learning may tend toward learning practices involving collaboration, project-based learning, and metacognitive practices, and may tend to use terminology such as collaborate, construct, interpret, engagement, and motivation (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999).

Analysis of educational policy may reveal metaphors that demonstrate how educational policymakers conceptualize learning.

Methods

This study used content analysis methodology (Oleinik, 2011; Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007), metaphor analysis methodology (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Schmitt, 2005; Deignan & Semino, 2010; Low & Todd, 2010), and elements of grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Thornberg, 2012). The text of ESSA and 46 policy resources were collected. The policy resources came from The American Enterprise Institute, The Brookings Institution, The Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, The Learning Policy Institute, and policy discussion in various other academic journals and organizations. A word-frequency analysis was conducted using a stop list informed by the literature regarding the two metaphors. Coding was conducted according to categories for each metaphor as described in the literature, as well as emergent categories through open coding.

Initial and emergent categories were refined through constant comparison and ongoing literature review.

Findings

The word-frequency analysis revealed high frequency of words related to the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning. The most commonly-used words were *standards, system, achievement, requirements, information, improvement, performance, core, assessment, accountability*, and similar words.

The metaphor analysis revealed the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor to be the dominant metaphor of learning. Also emergent from the data was a *business/management* metaphor—not a metaphor of learning, but a metaphor of education or schooling. This conceptualization sees education as a business enterprise in which the “product” is test scores, and the goals are efficiency, standardization, growth/improvement, and innovation. This metaphor also emphasizes assessment, accountability, and quality-control. Only one resource indicated the *construction* metaphor.

The most commonly-used words were those which relate to the *business/management* metaphor. Other commonly-used words were those which relate to the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor. No commonly-used words were related to the *construction* metaphor.

Discussion

These findings provide tentative evidence that the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor is indeed dominant as suggested by educational researchers such as Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Tippins (1999). The prominence of a *business/management* metaphor of education is also of concern. Conceptualizations and practices of learning and education embodied the positivist assumption that there is one reality and were grounded in the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning where knowledge is an objective entity external to the learner—articulated and curated by persons and institutions of authority—which must be transferred to the learner (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). The dominance of the *business/management* metaphor of education may be related to the socio-historical moment in which corporate forces have become deeply entrenched in local implementation of policy through delivery of resources such as canned curricula, textbooks, learning management systems, and testing packages.

The findings presented here suggest that current education policy as exemplified by the ESSA marks a continuation of a conceptualization of learning grounded in the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor of learning and the *business/management* metaphor of education. Furthermore, these findings reveal an absence of a conceptualization of learning grounded in the *construction* metaphor of learning.

Research Implications

This study suggests that education policy both reflects and perpetuates the *transfer/acquisition* metaphor, and that educational research grounded in a *construction* metaphor is being interpreted through policies grounded in an incompatible metaphor. This study investigated a small sample of policy documents, and these findings are limited to a specific context. Despite these limitations, these findings suggest a problem with incompatible conceptualizations of learning between those held by education policymakers and educational researchers, upon whose findings these policies are based. This problem could be of sufficient urgency that more studies investigating the problem and possible solutions are warranted.

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Jonan Donaldson is in the second year of the Ph.D. program. His research focus is at the intersection of learning sciences, creativity, agency, and technology. He is currently investigating conceptualizations of learning, design thinking, and designerly ways of knowing. Prior to coming to Drexel, he was an educator for nearly two decades. The first decade was in Osaka, Japan, and in the second decade he taught technologies for teaching and learning in master's degree programs at Western Oregon University and Oregon State University.