

Correctional Educators' Metaphorical Perceptions of Their Professional Selves

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Abstract

Metaphor is a widely studied phenomenon, valued not only for its aesthetic appeal and variety but also for its significant role in shaping thinking and cognition. In qualitative educational research, metaphors serve as valuable instruments for depicting existing educational states, revealing new insights into educational practice and theory, as well as for gaining a deeper understanding of educators' world. Metaphors allow for linking information about one familiar concept to another, creating a new understanding through the comparison process that generates new meaning. Educators working in juvenile correctional institutions or reformatories form a rather under-researched community. As they carry out their educational activities in a closed world, there is limited information available about them. This study adopted a qualitative research design. Within the framework of semi-structured individual interviews conducted with fifteen correctional educators, I used the method of metaphor collection based on analogy, using the target concept of *juvenile correctional educator*. The resulting twenty-seven metaphors were organised into source concepts and subjected to content analysis. While the majority of the metaphors pertain to care and nurturing, others point to the closed nature of the institution, suggesting that the focus here is more on the role of the caregiver rather than that of the knowledge transmitter. With this method, my aim was to explore juvenile correctional educators' most complex image of their own professional selves.

Keywords: metaphor, metaphor analysis, qualitative educational research, reformatory, correctional educator

Introduction

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines a metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 1).

Metaphors have long been recognized in qualitative research as more than just a linguistic ornament. They have a profound influence on thinking and cognition and help individuals understand complex, abstract concepts. According to Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, first articulated in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), metaphors enable individuals to map knowledge from one domain of experience onto another, often more abstract domain. In this process, they generate meaning by linking familiar and unfamiliar concepts, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of those unfamiliar concepts. This theory has had a substantial influence across many disciplines, including education, psychology, and cognitive science.

Within qualitative educational research, metaphor analysis serves as a powerful method for uncovering the hidden dimensions of teachers' self-perceptions and their professional identities. It provides both practicing and prospective teachers the opportunity to explore and understand their own thought processes, as well as to increase their awareness of the characteristics of their personal theories that influence their behaviour (Fábián, 2015). Pedagogues often use metaphorical language to express how they view their roles, relationships with students, and the educational environment in which they operate. As metaphors provide a unique window into the cognitive structures and emotional dimensions that outline teachers' practices, they help elucidate how they deal with the challenges and responsibilities inherent in their profession (Cameron & Low, 1999; Leavy, 2013).

One under-researched area within this field involves educators working in juvenile correctional institutions. These professionals operate in a unique work environment that combines elements of traditional pedagogy with aspects of rehabilitation, child protection and detention. Juvenile correctional educators carry out their educational activities in a tightly controlled and often isolated world, where the traditional boundaries between educator and caregiver are blurred. As such, relatively little is known about how they perceive their roles or how they deal with the dual responsibilities of education and discipline. By examining the metaphors they use, this study aims to provide insight into the juvenile correctional educators' most complex image of their own professional selves.

The Role of Educators in Juvenile Correctional Institutions

Correctional education is generally referred to as the educational activities that are carried out while an individual is subject to supervision of the criminal justice system (Carver and Harrison, 2016). Educators working in juvenile correctional institutions hold a unique position within both the educational and correctional systems. Positioned as pedagogues, they form a community that has received relatively little scholarly attention.

The juvenile detention centre, or reformatory, operates simultaneously as a penal and pedagogical institution. On the one hand, it is part of the child protection system and therefore holds an educational function. On the other hand, correctional education is a sanction involving the deprivation of liberty for juvenile offenders, who must obey the rules of the institution. This duality creates a complex environment in which educators impart knowledge, foster rehabilitation and ensure compliance with institutional rules.

The role of the correctional educator is further complicated by the closed nature of the juvenile correctional institution, where they must strike a balance between maintaining authority and providing emotional and psychological support to their students, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have experienced trauma, neglect, or engagement with the criminal justice system. This unique professional environment requires a multifaceted identity, one that combines caregiving, teaching, disciplinarian work, and psychological support.

Metaphors in Qualitative Educational Research

Metaphor is a frequently studied phenomenon in both cognitive science and education due to its significant role in shaping human thought and cognition. According to Elliot, metaphors play a central role in qualitative research because by their nature, they stimulate the imagination, evoke emotions, and inspire action and change (Elliot, 1984). Beyond their aesthetic appeal, metaphors allow individuals to understand abstract concepts by linking them to more familiar, concrete experiences, thus generating new meanings through the comparison process.

Definitions of metaphor abound, but a commonly accepted one in the context of education is that metaphors allow individuals to see, describe, or interpret unfamiliar educational phenomena, events, or actions in terms of something more familiar (Botha, 2009). For instance, teachers are often metaphorically described as “guides,” which reflects their role in facilitating student learning rather than simply imparting knowledge.

Munby and Russell (1990) suggest that the study of metaphors can be beneficial for all pedagogues. In their view, observing how a person describes the world provides insights into how that individual interprets it. Brugman et al. (2019) highlight that metaphorical language helps create cognitive models, which guide how individuals interpret abstract concepts. In educational contexts, this aligns with how both educators and learners use metaphors to interpret complex pedagogical relationships and ideas.

According to Perry and Cooper (2001), metaphors serve as mirrors through which educators can reflect on their professional lives, thereby encouraging continuous and

purposeful self-reflection. Moreover, they enable both educators and learners to make sense of educational phenomena by relating them to something previously experienced (Botha, 2009). Cameron and Maslen (2010) emphasize that metaphors are not only useful for understanding personal cognitive frameworks but can also illuminate broader social dynamics within educational institutions. This helps researchers delve into the relational and emotional aspects of teaching.

Metaphors, as a qualitative research tool, have proven to be effective in various areas of education for uncovering attitudes and beliefs related to the concepts and individuals being studied, as well as for describing existing educational states and gaining new insights into educational practice and theory. Lynne Cameron (2003), for example, conducted an extensive analysis of metaphor use within educational discourse. Her research aimed at exploring the ways in which metaphors are used in classroom settings, how students develop an understanding of these metaphors, and how metaphors facilitate the learning process. It demonstrates that educators use a range of metaphors to bridge and minimize the gap between students' initial and explicit knowledge during classroom discourse (Cameron, 2003). Levin and Wagner (2006) explored student views on writing by examining the metaphors they used in their reflective writing within the science classroom (Levin & Wagner, 2006). Kissné Zsámboki and Patyi (2018) examined the historical changes in the image of kindergartens using the method of metaphor analysis, comparing past and present perceptions of kindergartens with the views of current kindergarten teacher training students (Kissné Zsámboki & Patyi, 2018). Similarly, metaphor analyses conducted in special education have provided valuable insights into attitudes and perceptions regarding special education concepts and individuals with disabilities (Őrley, 2011; Péntzes, 2008; Tamás, 2017; Tóthné Aszalai, 2018).

As far as correctional educators are concerned, metaphors offer a way to articulate the complex and often conflicting demands of their work, providing insight into how they manage the intersections of education, rehabilitation, and discipline.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design, employing the method of metaphor collection, based on analogy, to explore the professional identities of correctional educators. Fifteen educators working in a juvenile correctional institution participated in semi-structured interviews, a technique recognized as ideal for conducting exploratory research (King, 1994; Sankar & Jones, 2008). These interviews were specifically designed to encourage in-depth reflection on the educators' professional lives, with a particular focus on how they perceive their roles within both the educational and the correctional context. The interviewees were

asked to make comparisons that described their roles and responsibilities, reflecting on their day-to-day experiences working with juvenile offenders. The educators' responses were then classified and grouped according to their content. I used the categories of "target concept" and "source concept" known from cognitive linguistics, which refer to the two entities between which the examined subjects establish a metaphorical connection. The target concept in this case was *juvenile correctional educator*, while the source concepts emerged from the metaphors provided by the interviewees. Given that metaphor analysis fundamentally involves exploring the shared characteristics between two domains (Vámos, 2003), I focused on identifying the common features inherent in the meanings of the metaphors told by the educators during the interviews.

The metaphors obtained for the target concept of *juvenile correctional educator* have been arranged into nine distinct source concepts according to their content (See Table 1).

Table 1

Source concepts and metaphors obtained for the target concept of *juvenile correctional educator*

Source concepts	Metaphors
Caregiver, nurturer	<i>a gardener</i> <i>a desert reviver (person)</i> <i>a mother hen</i> <i>a lion tamer</i> <i>a zookeeper</i> <i>a wrangler (animal trainer)</i>
Family member	<i>a strictly loving parent</i> <i>a strict aunt</i> <i>a mother</i> <i>a mother and a father in one person</i>
Healer	<i>a psychiatric nurse</i> <i>a psychologist</i>
Slave, beast of burden	<i>a treadmill worker</i> <i>a horse (horse-drawn sleigh)</i>
Leader	<i>a pack leader</i> <i>a training officer</i> <i>a coach</i>

Source concepts	Metaphors
Guardian, protector	<i>the good shepherd</i> <i>a screw, hack (prison officer)</i> <i>a jailer mother hen</i>
A multitalented person	<i>a polymath</i> <i>a Renaissance man</i>
Educator, legal expert	<i>a teacher</i> <i>a lawyer</i>
Top athlete	<i>an Olympian (a competitor in the Olympic Games)</i>

Research Findings

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently recurring metaphors referred to roles of care and nurturing, such as “gardener,” “desert reviver,” “mother hen,” “lion tamer,” “zookeeper,” and “wrangler.” Additionally, a range of metaphors emerged that reflected professions associated with leadership, healing, and judgment, including “training officer,” “teacher,” “lawyer,” “psychologist,” “nurse,” and “coach.”

Caregiver, Nurturer

Educators in juvenile correctional institutions perform highly multifaceted roles, encompassing teaching, administrative tasks, mentoring new staff, and assisting university students completing their traineeship there. The “gardener” metaphor properly illustrates the complexity of their work, as both gardeners and educators engage in planning, nurturing growth, and creating optimal conditions for development. At the same time, both roles require patience, attentiveness, and the ability to foster growth over time. Similarly, the metaphor of “a desert reviver” highlights the challenge that educators face in trying to transform juvenile offenders who often lack emotional and intellectual nourishment into model citizens within a limited timeframe.

The “mother hen” metaphor embodies protection, care, and guidance. Like a mother hen sheltering her chicks, correctional educators provide a safe and supportive environment for juvenile offenders. They attend to their individual needs, encourage them, and strive to ensure the well-being of those under their care.

Metaphors such as “lion tamer,” “zookeeper,” and “wrangler” point to the disciplinary aspects of correctional education further depicting educators as professionals who tame unsocialized juveniles and guide them towards positive behaviours by harnessing their innate tendencies. They oversee the daily routines of juveniles, maintain a secure environment, and monitor progress, addressing both physical and psychological needs. They also train juveniles in social norms and life skills.

Family Member

The “strictly loving parent” metaphor captures the dual role of educators in providing care while enforcing discipline and accountability. Reward and punishment are essential tools in correctional education, with institutions often emphasizing positive reinforcement to encourage normative behaviour. The “strict aunt” metaphor suggests a figure who cares deeply but is also willing to enforce discipline. Correctional educators often serve as such figures, being approachable yet maintaining the authority necessary for effective supervision. The metaphor “mother and father in one person” underscores the complex familial roles educators assume, embodying both maternal warmth and paternal strictness to foster social integration among juveniles. They must be versatile in their approach to meet the diverse emotional and developmental needs of those under their care.

Healer

The “psychiatric nurse” metaphor draws parallels between educators and mental health professionals who care for individuals with personality disorders and addictions. Both roles involve comprehensive rehabilitation efforts and require the flexible use of appropriate communication techniques. Correctional educators often work with juveniles who have experienced trauma or have behavioural and emotional disorders, necessitating a therapeutic approach to address underlying issues. The “psychologist” metaphor underscores the necessity for educators to possess qualities like empathy, acceptance, and the ability to help juveniles navigate life challenges effectively.

Slave, Beast of Burden

The “treadmill worker” metaphor suggests that correctional educators may experience feelings of being overworked or undervalued, reflecting the demanding and sometimes repetitive nature of their duties, which can lead to fatigue or burnout. The picture of the “horse” pulling a sleigh emphasizes the exhausting and relentless nature of educators’ work in juvenile institutions. Correctional educators, like the horse, carry significant responsibilities,

often under challenging conditions. Their efforts drive the progress of the juveniles and the institution, requiring steadfast commitment. At the same time, the horse pulling a sleigh symbolizes strength, and endurance.

Leader

The “pack leader” metaphor reflects the necessity for educators to be consistent, authoritative, and mentally strong to guide and unify the groups of juvenile offenders effectively. Similarly to a pack leader in animal groups, correctional educators establish authority and direction within the group, guiding behaviour, mediating conflicts, and fostering a sense of community and cooperation. The “training officer” metaphor further illustrates the strict adherence to rules and discipline required in institutional settings similar to military training environments. The educator’s role involves balancing firmness with guidance, teaching juveniles essential life skills, promoting discipline, and preparing them for successful reintegration into society.

Correctional educators also act as coaches by encouraging juveniles to reach their potential, providing constructive feedback, and cultivating talents and interests that can lead to personal success. A coach is a professional who leads the training of athletes and not only needs to know the sport’s techniques but must also have pedagogical sense and psychological knowledge to prepare athletes both physically and mentally for competitions. Similarly, in their work, educators must consider the juveniles’ age characteristics, individual abilities and traits, emotional state, level and pace of development, as well as all circumstances that serve the juveniles’ development.

Guardian, Protector

The “good shepherd” metaphor is one of the most emphasized metaphors in the Scriptures. Prophets speak of God as a shepherd but also refer to official leaders and kings as shepherds. The shepherd is a person whose job is to take care of sheep, moving them from one place to another. Correctional educators embody this role by overseeing the welfare of juveniles, guiding them through challenges, and safeguarding them from negative influences. They show the right path, direct, give protection, and provide emotional and mental support to those entrusted to them. An intriguing aspect of the “shepherd” metaphor is that shepherding is not merely an ancient profession in animal husbandry but also embodies a way of life.

One of my interviewees introduced a juvenile correctional variation of the “mother hen” metaphor commonly used for educators: the “jailer mother hen.” This term represents

a supportive, nurturing prison guard where the roles of caregiver and supervisor become equally prominent. The phrase is a compound of the slang term “jailer” and “mother hen,” highlighting the dual role of the educator as both a caring parental figure and a prison guard who supervises offenders. Correctional educators must balance compassion and support (the mother hen aspect) with the necessity of supervision and control (the jailer aspect), addressing the juveniles’ needs while maintaining institutional safety and order.

The third metaphor belonging to this category is the “screw” or “hack.” These are slang terms for prison officers and have the role to emphasize security, order, and enforcement of rules. Correctional educators share these responsibilities by maintaining a secure environment, enforcing institutional regulations, and ensuring that juveniles adhere to the established guidelines.

A Multitalented Person

Several interviewees alluded to the fact that an educator must embody the qualities of multiple professionals, effectively filling numerous roles in order to meet the diverse needs of juveniles. Thus, the metaphors “polymath” and “Renaissance man” refer to a person possessing a thoroughly developed personality and universal knowledge, serving as an expert across various disciplines. According to their job descriptions, in addition to their teaching, educational, and developmental duties, they also handle administrative tasks, assist in training newly hired staff at the institution, and facilitate the traineeship experiences of university students. Moreover, beyond their required teaching hours, they also take on numerous additional tasks, either on an occasional or regular basis, whenever the need arises or upon directive from their supervisors.

Educator, Legal Expert

The juvenile correctional educator is also a teacher who deals with teaching and education. As teachers, juvenile correctional institution staff plan curricula, prepare juveniles for examinations, and support their academic progress. Simultaneously, they are expected to be familiar with the most important laws affecting the operation and work of the institution, effectively serving as “legal experts” to ensure compliance and provide proper guidance within the legal framework governing their work.

Top Athlete

It was mentioned several times during the interviews that juvenile correctional educators are looked down on even by their peers within the teaching profession. Despite facing stigmatization within the profession, the “Olympian” metaphor carries educators’ desire

and hope for recognition and appreciation. Similarly to competitors in the Olympic Games striving for excellence, dedicated juvenile correctional educators persist in their efforts, understanding that their work may lead to significant positive outcomes even if only for a few individuals. This metaphor underscores the dedication and resilience required to achieve significant positive outcomes, even when immediate rewards are limited.

The findings suggest that correctional educators perceive themselves as multifaceted professionals who must make use of a wide range of skills and expertise in their work. Several metaphors, such as “coach,” “lawyer,” and “shepherd,” highlight the diverse roles that correctional educators play in the lives of those under their care. Whether guiding them through difficult emotional terrain, advocating for their rights within the institutional framework, or enforcing rules and expectations, correctional educators see themselves as jacks-of-all-trades who must be adaptable, resourceful, and resilient.

Conclusions

The metaphorical perceptions of correctional educators offer valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of their work. While the majority of metaphors emphasize care and nurturing, others highlight the disciplinary aspects of correctional education, suggesting that these educators must constantly navigate the tension between providing emotional support and maintaining control. The dual roles captured in these metaphors suggest that correctional educators are constantly balancing care with discipline, ensuring adherence to institutional rules while fostering personal growth. This complex interplay reflects the educators’ need to be adaptable, resourceful, and resilient.

Some metaphors underscore the rehabilitative focus of correctional education, drawing attention to the parallels between the roles of correctional educators and psychiatric professionals, as well as reflecting the broader societal role of correctional institutions as spaces for rehabilitation, where the goal is to help individuals reintegrate into society as functioning, law-abiding citizens. The metaphors used by correctional educators provide a rich and nuanced picture of their professional identities, revealing the complex and often contradictory nature of their work. Through these metaphors, it becomes clear that correctional educators play a vital role in both the rehabilitation and education of juvenile offenders, helping them develop the skills and attitudes necessary for reintegration into society.

The picture that emerges from this metaphor analysis is that of a correctional educator who is, in many ways, a “superhero” figure, balancing a wide range of responsibilities while often working in challenging and under-resourced environments. As B. Aczél (2010) puts it,

a correctional educator is someone “whose profession may encompass so many things that no detailed job description can fully capture, and for which even the best training institutions can hardly prepare them” (p. 98).

Despite the difficulties of their work, correctional educators remain dedicated, using their unique skill sets to help, guide, teach, and nurture those under their care. However, their work has got its frustrations and dissatisfactions as well, as reflected in the metaphors of exhaustion and futility that some of the interviewees used. These findings suggest that more attention should be paid to the emotional and psychological well-being of correctional educators, who often work under considerable pressure and with limited support.

By employing metaphor analysis in the context of juvenile correctional education—a relatively under-researched area—this study extends the application of metaphors in educational research. The metaphors articulated by correctional educators provide valuable insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of their professional identities and the complex realities of their professional environment. They reveal how these educators deal with the crossroads of education, rehabilitation, and discipline, often in challenging conditions that demand adaptability and emotional resilience.

I believe that my research—despite its limited scope—offers thought-provoking insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of correctional education and contributes to the relatively sparse literature on juvenile correctional educators. The resulting figurative language provides an opportunity to uncover and further contemplate deeper connections.

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