

Starting Strong III: Unpacking the Metaphor

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Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) last year released a new publication in the 'Starting Strong' series, purporting to be a 'quality toolbox' for early childhood education and care. Leaving aside the problematic notion of quality in relation to education, we argue that there is a serious problem with the idea of education as something that can be done with a toolbox, particularly in the formative stages of young children's education. We begin by introducing the OECD publication, focussing especially on the metaphor of the toolbox. We then explore the philosophical idea of metaphor as a persuasive device, using it to 'unpack' some of the contents of the OECD toolbox, in particular the policy 'levers' that feature so prominently. We conclude with the observation that the OECD use of the toolbox as a metaphor is an intentional and surreptitious way of inserting international economic imperatives into local government education policy.

Keywords: Metaphor, early childhood education, OECD.

The OECD Toolbox

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) last year released a new publication in the 'Starting Strong' series, *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox* (OECD, 2012), described as a 'quality toolbox' for early childhood education and care (ECEC) – referred to from here on as 'the publication'. The OECD mission is defined as promoting 'policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world' (OECD, 2013). Although social well-being is included in the definition, its emphasis is clearly on the economic, as OECD specifies its current focus on helping governments in member countries and elsewhere in four main areas: markets, public finances, economic growth, and work-related skills. Given the heavy emphasis on economic matters, it seems reasonable to question the kind of tools that OECD considers beneficial for early childhood education.

The publication is accompanied by a series of documents all entitled *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care*,¹ with the name of a target country emblazoned in large type on the cover, including (so far) a separate version for Sweden, Norway, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, Korea, Czech Republic, United Kingdom (England), Slovak Republic, and Finland. Presumably, naming the country implies local consultation and local relevance. The *Quality Matters* documents for all countries are remarkably similar to one another, all sharing the same three OECD authors,² with the same OECD consultants acknowledged for their work on

¹ List and access at http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/quality-matters-in-early-childhood-and-education_22269673

² The *Quality Matters* documents are authored by Miho Taguma, Ineke Litjens and Kelly Makowiecki. They are acknowledged along with Janice Heejin Kim as the OECD Early Childhood Education and Care team

preliminary drafts. The same people are credited with responsibility for the draft of the *Toolbox* publication as well, so it is understandable that much of the content of the *Quality Matters* documents is identical to sections of the master publication. Publishing purportedly local documents for specific countries is really just repeated re-badging of the original – a mechanism, we surmise, intended to increase the likelihood of subjective identification with the content, based on feelings of recognition and inclusion – ‘Oh look, it’s about us!’ Superficially framed as relevant to local contexts, the toolbox can be seen as a metaphor that appeals to familiar notions of getting things fixed, while, at the same time, advancing the OECD project of globalised economic governmentality.

The publication identifies five ‘policy levers’ as key to encouraging quality in ECEC, having positive effects on early child development and learning:

- Policy Lever 1: Setting out quality goals and regulations
- Policy Lever 2: Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Policy Lever 3: Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
- Policy Lever 4: Engaging families and communities
- Policy Lever 5: Advancing data collection, research and monitoring

(OECD, 2012, p. 9)

Clearly, the OECD ‘toolbox’ and its constituent ‘levers’ constitute education as a mechanical process, subject to remedies and improvements of a technician nature. There are, though, other metaphors/tropes/historical memes for education, e.g., growth, nurturing, care, training, socialisation, creative exploration, to name a few. Each appeals to specific sentiments, provides a unique emphasis, and steers thinking and practice in education in a particular direction. What, we ask, is the work being done by this new mechanical metaphor? What sentiments does it appeal to? And what are the intentions of those proposing that early childhood education might best be dealt with in terms of a toolbox consisting of a set of levers? To answer these questions, we turn now to the philosophical idea of metaphor, in particular to the way it functions as an effective rhetorical device.

The persuasive power of metaphor

Ricoeur (1977) argued that metaphors are more than tropes of language; they have the power to re-describe the world. Not merely a substitution of one name for another, metaphors establish tension between literal meaning and attributed meaning, creating new relationships with ideas that have previously gone unnoticed or that have not been put together before. The importance Ricoeur attributed to metaphorical language lays in the power of a well-placed metaphor to disturb our sense of reality, to expand the limits of our language and to bring about a ‘metamorphosis of both language and reality’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 85). Nietzsche went as far as to argue that all speech is metaphorical, with truth denigrated as ‘the duty to lie according to fixed convention’ (1990, p. 84), for the purpose of preserving at least some form of shared social life. That is to say, it is through metaphor that we create and express our understanding of reality. The point is not whether the physical or social world exists in some objective sense; rather, it is that we inevitably represent our experience or perception of reality through metaphor.

In metaphor, meaning does not inhere *within* objects or situations – it is derived *from* them, or even perhaps, *imposed upon* them. It involves writers/speakers, their intentions, the choice of words they use to represent their intentions, the reader’s/listener’s interpretation of those words, and his/her response (conscious and non-

responsible for drafting the Toolbox publication. Acknowledgement is also given for the contributions from ‘international experts’, although the nature and extent of the contributions are not made clear.

conscious, verbal and non-verbal) based on that interpretation – an interpretation itself influenced by individual experience. Once characterised as merely a linguistic decoration, metaphor is indispensable to our understanding of discourse, from the poetic through to the scientific.

We frequently use metaphor in an unconscious way, although it is fundamental to our social life and intricately interwoven in our narratives about ourselves. Lakoff and Johnson (2003/1980) argue that metaphors structure our perceptions and understandings, and affect the way we communicate ideas. As principal vehicles for understanding, metaphors play a central role in the construction of social and political reality through a ‘coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others. The acceptance of the metaphor, which forces us to focus *only* on those aspects of our experience that it highlights, leads us to view the entailments of the metaphor as being *true*’ (p. 157). The same authors note that metaphors were typically viewed within traditional philosophy as matters of ‘mere language’, a very limited perspective if we take into account ‘their conceptual nature, their contribution to understanding, or their function in cultural reality’ (ibid). The concern for truth in philosophy, they say, often comes out of a focus on objectivity, i.e., a search for objective (absolute and unconditional) truth – a quest that is not only impossible, but also ‘socially and politically dangerous’ (ibid, p. 159).

Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power – political leaders, religious leaders, business leaders, advertisers, the media, etc. In a culture where the myth of objectivism is very much alive and truth is always absolute truth, the people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true – absolutely and objectively true (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003/1980, p. 160).

Lakoff & Johnson also distance themselves from the opposite extreme – a radical subjectivist version of truth/reality in which meaning is merely a matter of private feelings, experiences, intuitions and values, not impacted by external context. They promote, instead, an *experiential* paradigm of ‘reasonable objectivity’ in which scientific knowledge is still possible, while acknowledging that such theory may hide as much as it highlights. In this paradigm, real things still exist independently of us, constraining both how we interact with them and how we comprehend them, but the experientialist myth emphasises that meaning is always meaning *to* a person. Where experientialism diverges from subjectivism, they say, is in its rejection of the Romantic idea that imaginative understanding is completely unconstrained.

We see the experientialist myth as capable of satisfying the real and reasonable concerns that have motivated the myths of both subjectivism and objectivism but without either the objectivist obsession with absolute truth or the subjectivist insistence that imagination is totally unrestricted. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003/1980, p. 228).

The use of metaphor as a rhetorical device is not new to philosophy, but the current call in the field of critical discourse analysis is for a more rigorous treatment of the political work done under the name of metaphor (see, for example, Hart, 2008; Musolff, 2012). Musolff (2012) cites the case of a Swiss politician whose racist remarks were excused because his metaphorical expression was considered merely ‘subjective imagery’ rather than factually incorrect statements, indicating that a ‘dominant nonchalant attitude to the meaning value of metaphors allows speakers to express and insinuate even the most extreme views under the guise of “subjectively” coloured figurative speech’ (Musolff, 2012, p. 303). Being a competent political speaker/writer, Musolff argues, implies the expert use of metaphors to promote potentially problematic political concepts without incurring the risk of being held legally or socially responsible. To be aware of the power of metaphor in this regard renders more visible the political intentions of the otherwise innocent wordsmiths.

Developing further on the use of metaphor in critical discourse analysis, Hart (2008) argues that metaphors may very well originate in discourse, but then become embedded at the conceptual level, privileging one understanding over another and creating a ‘cognitive unconscious’ (p. 94). Accepting that metaphor has a powerful influence on our perceptions, our understandings and our communication, we argue here that it is problematic for such influence to operate at an unconscious level. Inherent in education is a focus on bringing awareness to our personal and social situations, a focus that may be undermined by the insertion of metaphorical

elements to the education discourse in ways that are not considered or evaluated in terms of their possible outcomes. The metaphorical toolbox being offered by OECD is therefore queried here in terms of its role in the construction of social and political reality, and, as with any metaphor, how it may highlight some features of reality while hiding others. Our intention is to query the ‘socially and politically dangerous’³ imposition of a single metaphor in a territory such as education, especially when that metaphor appeals to heart-warming images like Bob the Builder⁴ and his toolbox, and even more especially when those images are projected by a hegemonic body as influential as OECD.

Unpacking the toolbox

As an attempt to ‘unpack’ the toolbox and bring awareness to some of the OECD constructions, we now apply the above ideas about metaphor to the OECD toolbox and its constituent levers. We examine the OECD intentions for these levers, and explore the potential impact of some different possible metaphors.

The ‘tool’ metaphor is not new in philosophy. For Aristotle, everything has a *telos* – a purpose or final end, so to understand the significance of what something is, one needs to examine its purpose. The *telos* of a knife, for instance, is to cut, because it is created by humans to serve that very purpose. Heidegger’s early tool analysis explored the relational nature of tools and the ‘in order to’ quality, while his later work on technology (Heidegger, 1977) argues that modern technology is a ‘setting-upon nature’, a challenging that calls for only certain aspects to reveal themselves, while others remain concealed. He uses the example of a river, which, dammed up for a power plant, becomes a ‘water power supplier’ deriving its essence from its utility as a resource for the power plant. In that mode, the river is revealed not in its essence but in its utility. Under modern technology, everything is ordered to stand by as a ‘standing-reserve’, where objects lose their character and are only partially revealed. Dewey argued that, as a society, we gain nothing if our progress towards freedom is merely a vocational exercise to ‘increase in the mechanical efficiency of the human tools of production’, while we leave the intelligence which controls those tools as the ‘exclusive possession of remote scientists and captains of industry’ (Dewey, 1916, p. 300). What link these analyses for us are the common threads of goal orientation / extrinsic purpose in relation to people, and an instrumental view of human endeavour as something to be harnessed for the benefit of self-interested others.

In day-to-day life, use of a toolbox generally signifies something needing to be built, repaired, or otherwise modified. A new building may be under construction, some equipment may be broken, or existing resources may need alteration or improvement to their design. We can readily conjure up images of trades people at work, applying their various skilled crafts to the improvement of the way things work, without eventual users having to be too bothered with the fine detail. From experience, it is easy to associate the use of a toolbox with enhancing the quality of our life and our surroundings. For a tradesperson wielding the tools, the toolbox may be a strong feature of his/her identity, and the tools a means to provide the wherewithal for economic and social survival. Instances of tools not being effective or not working properly are addressed through the acquisition of better tools or through the use of other tools to effect repair. Either way, the image of a toolbox and its contents have generally positive connotations for most. Left unexamined, the OECD ‘Toolbox’ is likely to be presumed as beneficial. It is not clear though, from the metaphor or from the publication, what it is that needs constructing, repairing or redesigning. It is also not clear who the toolbox is for, how it is to be used, or what ends it will achieve.

OECD is quite specific about the kind of tools contained in its toolbox – we are dealing with a series of levers, as in ‘policy levers’. In physics, a lever may be defined as something like a rigid bar resting on a pivot,

³ To use the words of Lakoff and Johnson, cited earlier.

⁴ Bob the Builder is an animated television series created in the UK and screened around the world, depicting Bob and the Can-Do Crew hammering out solutions that lead to a job well done, demonstrating the power of positive-thinking, problem-solving, teamwork and follow-through. (http://www.bobthebuilder.com/usa/about_bob.asp)

used to help move a heavy or load with one end when pressure is applied to the other, although levers can take other forms, like a pulley or a set of cogs. The mechanical advantage of a lever is that one can (a) move a heavy object using less force than the weight of the object, (b) propel an object faster by applying a force at a slower speed, or (c) move an object further than the distance you apply to the lever. It was Archimedes who claimed that given a place to stand, and a long enough lever, he could move the earth – although impossible distances would be involved.⁵ From the original French *lever* (to raise or lift up), the word ‘leverage’ now commonly signifies efficiency in accomplishing a task, although in general parlance the lever retains much of the nuance associated with the application of mechanical force – a nuance that is not well-suited to educating young children. Neither unsuitability nor impossibility, however, seems to deter OECD in its quest to move the discursive ‘world’ (of early childhood education) with such levers.

We argued earlier that metaphor has the power to re-describe the world, disturbing our sense of reality, and that the acceptance of any particular metaphor bring us to focus *only* on particular aspects and to view the entailments of the metaphor as being *true*. Noted too was the social and political danger of a single metaphor for our social reality being imposed upon us by powerful agencies, which thereby get to define what we consider to be true. Clearly, the OECD selection of the toolbox and its constituent levers as an appropriate metaphor for education signals something of a worldwide agenda for education. As with any metaphor for education, the selection highlights some aspects while hiding others, a concealment that can’t be exposed by staring more intently at the same image. To examine the extent of what remains hidden, we need to look differently, so we now explore some possibilities for a different kind of box as an image for education – not a toolbox, but (say) a lunchbox.

The Urban dictionary⁶ has ‘lunchbox’ as a pejorative term for a clueless person lacking common sense (That kid is such a lunchbox!), a term possibly evolved from the phrase ‘out to lunch’ to indicate an absent minded individual. The newer term ‘lunch bag’ is applied to a person not even good enough for the box! But the metaphor is richer than that, in use of the word ‘lunchbox’ to refer to particular aspects of human genitalia – hardly appropriate as a metaphor for early childhood education, so we don’t intend to elaborate on that here.

Ignoring the urban dictionary, and exploring the metaphor further to interpret some of OECD’s pet phrases, our lunchbox could contain a ‘quality goals and regulations’ sandwich (in which the real content is limited by the form of its outer layers), a ‘curriculum standards’ biscuit (something to get your teeth into, to nibble in small quantities over a cup of tea perhaps, but ultimately not very good for you), or a ‘data collection, research and monitoring’ vitamin drink (a refreshing lift in vitality when energy or enthusiasm for various research projects is flagging or when the findings of the research leaves one feeling somewhat dull and listless). We could discuss education in terms of making fillings more palatable, disguising uninteresting content with attractive sugar coatings, or achieving healthy outcomes through balanced diets. Each of these ingredients would give us a different taste of what life is like in early childhood centres – and give us something to chew over at the same time, as a different perspective to shed light on OECD’s agenda.

What if education were perceived in terms of an art box, covering a range of media, with an assortment of paintbrushes, various shades of colour, and some sculpting tools perhaps? Rather than treating early childhood as a load to be moved with levers, we might be playing with shades of light, or experimenting with perspective and vanishing points to gain fresh insights into the play of early childhood. Think: creative composition, contrast, collage, connoisseurship, colour harmony, complementary colours, naturalism, pictorial space, sketches, shadows and landscapes, or even trompe l’oeil, texture, spatial depth, symmetry, or if one wanted to be

⁵ If this feat were attempted in a uniform gravitational field with an acceleration equivalent to that of the Earth, the corresponding distance to the fulcrum which a human of mass 70 kg would be required to stand to balance a sphere of 1 Earth mass, with center of gravity 1m to the fulcrum, would be... about 9 million light years. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lever>)

⁶ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lunchbox>

really technical – a dash of *sprezzatura*! (nonchalance). Or perhaps, a certain *Je ne sais quoi* – suggesting the impossibility of defining the term itself.

Or more worryingly, a Pandora's Box. According to the classical Greek myth, Pandora disobeyed instructions and opened the box (actually, a beautiful jar) unleashing all manner of evil upon the world. To open Pandora's Box is to perform an action that may seem small or innocent, but that turns out to have severe and far-reaching consequences. On a brighter note for us in education is that one more thing lay at the bottom – the Spirit of Hope.

Our examples of the lunchbox, the art box and Pandora's Box may be considered a form of light-hearted play and not a serious contender in the quest to 'box up' education into a worldwide distribution package for consumption by the New Zealand Business Round Table⁷, or by other organisations with an economic agenda. They are presented here just to point out the degree to which a single metaphor limits all sorts of other possibilities. There may be images from our three 'not tool' boxes that speak to us positively about aspects of education: e.g., from the lunchbox – life being about balance, or use of suitable ingredients; from the art box – adopting various perspectives, or dealing the intangible; or from Pandora's box – the spirit of hope despite all adversity. If the OECD metaphor is realised, these different possibilities are limited in that they have little to do with the overall instrumental nature of the toolbox and its mechanical contents. In the wielding of the toolbox, education is clearly instrumental, solutions to problems are technical, and the work of early childhood education is to be achieved through leverage – i.e., the application of force with the intention of moving loads, usually with a minimum outlay of effort.

Conclusion

We conclude with the observation that the OECD use of the toolbox as a metaphor is an intentional, powerful way of inserting international economic imperatives into local government education policy, in ways that the citizenry is not aware of. Depending on one's perspective, such insertion may be construed as a form of benevolent aristocracy focussed on the promotion of economic prosperity on a global scale, supported by 'policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world' (OECD, 2013). Alternatively, the toolbox may be seen as an insidious and purely instrumental mechanism to advance OECD's express agenda to 'restore confidence in markets and the institutions and companies that make them function' (ibid.), and in that quest, to promote economic growth and productivity without too much concern for benevolence.

'Toolbox' is a concept clearly at home in the world of machines or on the construction site – territories heavily dependent on the world of physics, forces, engineering and mechanical structures – territories where human characteristics (emotions, sentiments and ambitions) and social concerns (negotiations, communities, equality, justice, democracy and protest) signify trouble, interfering as they do in the teleological goal of growth at all costs, a towering edifice, a useful structure or an efficient piece of engineering.

Even if OECD activity is beneficial for world populations (debatable, selective at best), our concluding position is that the end does not justify the means. One of the features of democracy in practice is groups of people making decisions for themselves in an informed way, albeit that much decision making is delegated to representative bodies. The use of a metaphorical device such as the toolbox serves to obfuscate rather than clarify, so does not provide a basis for decision to be made in an informed way. Although our democracy is under siege from many angles, it is still better than having whole populations resign their lives to a distant aristocracy, benevolent or otherwise.

⁷ The Business Round Table is a New Zealand initiative that describes itself as 'a business group with a difference... a think tank that is a membership organisation... an association of business leaders that is also a research institute... [a group who] 'as business leaders have to play a role in public life and contribute to public debates'. <http://nzinitiative.org.nz/About+Us.html>

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