
Preface

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet: Words, words, words.

—Shakespeare (1623/1951, 2.2.191–192)

We began this book with a profound sense of malaise in our times. Somehow, something wasn't right. So many educational problems appear to be recurring, persistent, and intractable. In trying to discern why we were troubled we settled on the language used by educators, policy developers, politicians, critics, and parents in and about the schools in both of our countries—the US and the UK. We determined that at the root of the language used to describe the problems were some powerful images that were evocative and resonant. In short, we determined that the world of practice and action is anchored to a powerful world of symbols and sounds.

As we sifted through the phrases and linguistic patterns that ran through the rhetoric of both of our nations regarding education, we began to notice many similarities. We were especially provoked to think about the metaphors that are used to define education. Many imply partial solutions, or at least include images that contain solutions. We took note that when Yale economist John Geanakoplos began to develop a whole new way of looking at the financial markets and why they went bust, he was moved by a metaphor from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: Shylock demanding "a pound of flesh" (Whitehouse, 2009, p. A1). Geanakoplos thought that "a pound of flesh" was an image that underscored the importance of collateral in lending. When collateral was not adequate for inflated prices and lenders became uncertain, a round of selling commenced that began a downward spiral, where "falling prices and rising margins reinforce one another," that is, the "pound of flesh" (Whitehouse, 2009, p. A18). The use of this classical Shakespearean metaphor is credited with developing

a new paradigm that explained the market forces few economists understood at the time.

We believe a similar tactic may be possible in education if we can understand how our use of symbols and language confines us to tired old analysis and worn-out solutions that we find replete in the laws and rhetoric of both nations, as they continue to struggle to improve the schooling of all children in their care. But first we had to deconstruct the most common metaphors embedded in education and why they were, at best, not adequate to the task and, at worst, toxic in their effect. This dismantling is the genesis of our book. We think it's unlike anything you may have read before.

The effort is anchored in a belief that education can enhance children's lives. That it does not appear to for many children is not the result of the conscious intention of policy makers or administrators. Rather, the pressures that shape and sometimes distort or impede children's progress are embedded in the foundations of human activity, in our social structures, and in our language. While politicians and school leaders devote much resource and attention to the daily practice of schools, language may infiltrate quite different attitudes and practices than those consciously intended. The mechanisms are not easily discernible. The language we use is like the air we breathe; we depend on it completely, but until it is cut off we are not aware of its importance. That it is important is a starting point of this book. Language does not just communicate our thoughts: it is thought. It shapes how we exist in the world, our morality, and our relationships. We use it constantly, creatively using metaphor to invite a kind of engagement. We create our world anew each time we compare one thing with another and invoke the tension of considering the similarity and dissimilarity between the two things compared. If we intend to disturb persisting patterns, it is through language that we must start. One of the greatest writers on the relationship between language, politics, and society, George Orwell, believed that changing language can change society. Going back even further in history, Plato (1973) depicted rhetoric, one form of which is the use of metaphors, as engaging not just the mind but also the soul. Our book focuses on language, and particularly on how metaphors are used in and about education and, more widely, what this can reveal not just about practice but about the soul, or the morality, of our education. It is intended to change thought as a precursor to changing much else. To improve our schools we must think about them differently. To do that we must describe them differently, and we must be acutely aware of how those descriptions lock us into predetermined solutions. Language is not neutral. It has a logic all its own, once it becomes text. We hope our readers will think more seriously about the words they use before they become text: in laws, rules, regulations, speeches, professional discourse, and editorial page soundings.

To achieve this very ambitious goal we draw upon writers from a range of disciplines and throughout history. We reflect a perspective from the US and the UK. We invoke images that may seem shocking, for example leaders as lunatics. We hope thereby to achieve to some degree a very difficult endeavor, and that is to influence people's thinking and not just their practice by hitting them in the heart as well as the mind. We leave it to the reader to determine if we are successful.

We gratefully acknowledge help along the way. Hudson Perigo at Corwin was consistently encouraging of a book that is somewhat "off piste." Alison Williamson cheerfully checked on references from the earliest literature onwards and prepared the manuscript. Working across the US and UK cultures of American and British co-authors has made each of us see things anew. There was more difference in how we think and how we use language ourselves than might have appeared at first. Working together has moved us both on. We hope that the book does the same for our readers on both sides of the pond.