

# Exploring the Power of Metaphors to Build the Boat through Self-Study

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Metaphor

Critical Friends

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Immigrant Educator

Professional Identity Crisis

Resources

Icelandic Preschool

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Reflective Teaching Journal

Metaphors are widely used by self-study researchers to express the power of their practice, context, and professional identities (East et al., 2009; Kitchen, 2009; MacKinnon & Bullock, 2016). While reflecting on the first year of my teaching journal, I found that my professional experience was complex. I was struggling to understand myself as an educator and my experiences through metaphors.

In this paper, I explore how metaphors capture the professional challenges of my self-study as a Japanese immigrant educator in the Icelandic preschool context. I am educated and trained in two countries, and this unique background confused me in my first years of teaching in Iceland. Cultural conflicts put me in a professional identity crisis, and I needed to find a way to negotiate my confusion. This question of how the metaphor of building the boat helps me envision new ways of understanding my professional identity crisis as an immigrant educator pilots the process.

While sailing on the seas of a teaching environment, the waves can be high or calm. I am the educator and the sailor of a tiny boat. The boat represents my teaching experiences, and I use my cultural and professional resources to build my boat stronger (Gonzales et al., 2005). When the sailing is tough, I need to know how I navigate my boat so as to not give up on my voyage.

## Context of the Study

I am a Japanese immigrant educator who is educated and trained in both Japan and Iceland. After working as a cram school (so-called *juku*) teacher for some years, I moved to Iceland in 2008. Japanese teaching culture in the early 2000s was teacher-centered, and I basically had to follow what the curriculum required. My sense of respect for children's autonomy was put aside and improving my teaching technique was the focus of reflection. Everyone was put under pressure to study hard to enroll in more prestigious schools. In the Japanese education system, the student-teacher ratio can range from 20:1 to 30:1 for the purpose of fostering a collective social mindset from preschool (Tobin et al., 2009). Tobin and his colleagues (2009) point out that having a high student-teacher ratio is the cultural logic of Japan to increase children's social skills and to let them feel that they are part of society. Strict discipline is expected to keep children under control.

Although I justified my migration to Iceland by being married to an Icelander, the truth was that I wanted to escape from that educational value. I did not fit this competitive culture. In my master's project in Iceland, I studied about Icelandic preschool educators' sense of professionalism. During my study, I learned that the student-teacher ratio is much lower

in Iceland than in Japan and that children's freedom in play is highly respected (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Nishida, 2013). That experience motivated me to work as a preschool educator in Iceland, where the relationship between teacher and student is more like friends. However, this was the first time I worked in an early childhood education setting. I knew that many immigrants chose to work at preschools to learn the language (Ragnarsdóttir, 2010), and I also wished to learn language through my work. I was very optimistic then.

The study takes place in an Icelandic preschool located in a fishing town outside of the capital city of Reykjavík. This preschool is semi-private and it practices a rather unique pedagogy that segregates boys and girls for equal rights (The Hjalli model, n.d.). The school ethos of inclusion and gender equality may be more valued than in other public preschools. My position then was as a substitute educator who covered the absence of other staff. For example, during my seven working hours, I had to lead a group of two-year-old girls, five-year-old boys, and finish my day by doing dishes in the kitchen. My job responsibilities were diverse, requiring a great amount of flexibility to work in different situations.

Since Iceland is surrounded by the sea, fishing is one of the most important industries and influences Icelandic culture and lifestyle (Lacy, 1998). There is a harbor with fishing boats near the school. Children in the area grow up with the sound of the whistles and scents of the sea. Fish is served for preschool lunch a few times a week. Many people are involved in fishing, and some family members of my local friends are actually fishermen. One of the fathers of a child often brought us unique fish or creatures to show the children. The child was so proud of his fisherman father. Because of these circumstances, it was natural for me to reflect on my teaching experiences around metaphors related to the sea.

## Methodology

Narrative excavates the complexity of educators' experiential knowledge through metaphors (Craig, 2018). Kitchen (2009) explained that narrative self-study is "a methodology for understanding the personal dimension of teaching" (p. 9) and developing a deeper understanding of our practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Craig (2018) emphasized how narrative balances the complexity of an educator's understanding of a current challenge. Using narrative for my study is legitimate to glean insights into my experiences to understand why I was in a professional identity crisis. My narrative stories can be shared with others through how I used metaphors to verbalize my thoughts (Munby & Russell, 1990).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) explored metaphor from a cognitive perspective and established the conceptual metaphor theory. They described how metaphor is conceptual in nature and represents a person's thoughts and action; it is not only a matter of words. In our daily life, conceptual metaphor is used by anyone to express time, object, space, emotion, causation, morality, and so on. Metaphors rule our lives (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). Since Lakoff and Johnson's study in 1980, metaphors have been researched by numbers of cognitive scientists. Kövecses (2010) pointed out that a person understands and reasons things through metaphors because metaphors inhabit our thoughts. Moreover, metaphors express the reality of society and culture and the psychological aspects of a person.

In self-study, metaphors are effective in exploring teachers' professional identity (Bullough, 1994). Bullough (1994) explained how metaphors that arose from his education-related life story captured essences of teaching, and it was his "on going quest for authenticity in teaching" that integrated his "personal and social identities" (p. 110). MacKinnon and Bullock (2016) explored their own teaching in science teacher education through the metaphor of music sessions to engage in collaborative self-study. Using the idea of teaching as a jazz session, they reflected on themselves as teacher educators and their relationships with students. Their collaborative discussion around the music metaphor helped them develop new perspectives in teaching.

Munby and Russell (1990) said that metaphors could help teachers verbalize their professional thinking and look at data differently. They suggested that "the power of metaphor might be invoked profitably by teachers and administrators as a way of reflecting on and possibly improving their own practice" (Munby & Russell, 1990, p. 120). It took me some time to see how metaphors could express the complexity of my professional development as an

immigrant educator in the Icelandic preschool context because I did not know the power of metaphors. However, MacKinnon and Bullock (2016) inspired me to connect my teaching and relationship with children through metaphors. I began to look into my experience through conceptual metaphors to articulate my professional contexts and experiences through narrative (Bullough, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; MacKinnon & Bullock, 2016). When I began to understand what I was going through in my teaching with metaphors of myself being a sailor on a boat, I realized the power of metaphors to transform my teaching and my professional identity (Craig, 2018; Munby & Russell, 1990).

My main data comes from my reflective teaching journal that I kept from the beginning of my work as a substitute educator. I extracted my first year (August 2014 - June 2015) for this particular study. All names in the text are pseudonyms. When coding my journal and the stories I had written, I learned that coding can be used as an analytic tool to generate metaphors (Miles et al., 2014). I used the coding strategy by Saldaña (2013) to capture images of my experiences in the first cycle of coding and then re-configured codes to develop their meanings with supporting stories. As a result, codes developed into metaphors that coherently explained the development of my understanding of my professional experience. Emails and texting application communication with my critical friend Hafþís provided me with additional data and enhanced the validity and transparency of my study (Samaras, 2011).

I met Hafþís when I first enrolled in the University of Iceland in 2009. She has been encouraging me to reflect on my teaching experiences in Japan and develop my pedagogical view of teacher-centered to student-centered since then. While looking into my experiences, Hafþís takes on an important role as an observer of my position from different perspectives (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Hafþís has been reading and listening to my stories from the beginning of my learning and teaching in Iceland. When I came to the image of building a boat to understand my teaching context, she questioned where I was in this metaphoric exploration. Her critical inquiry stimulated my data analysis and revealed multiple dimensions of my professional experience by making meanings through metaphors (Samaras, 2011). Samaras (2011) suggested that triangulation is one of the methods for assessing the quality of self-study. Miles et al (2014) explained that triangulation requires at least three independent measures to support findings. These include data sources, methods and theories. My reflective teaching journal, communication, and notes with my critical friend Hafþís and my use of metaphors intertwine to corroborate the trustworthiness of the study.

## Outcomes

Drawing on my teaching context by using metaphors related to the sea, I explored ways to sail on a boat that represents my experience. The sea is my teaching environment. I am the sailor of the boat that could be made of any professional or cultural resources I have. Sometimes fragile as paper, sometimes strong as metal, this is the story of how I navigate my boat which has been transforming through the self-study voyage to the new horizon of teaching.

### *Sailing to the New Horizon*

My self-study officially began when I found myself lost in the middle of the sea of the Icelandic preschool context, not knowing where I was heading. Upon completing my teacher education in Iceland, I began working in an Icelandic preschool in August 2014. During my teacher education in Iceland, I learned about the Icelandic preschool context in theory. I felt hope that there might be a new horizon of teaching that I had never experienced when I was working as an educator in the Japanese education system. Because of my past practical experiences and educational background both in Japan and Iceland, people at my work believed that I could start teaching right away. In reality, I was a naïve sailor who did not know how to build a strong boat.

### *Origami Boat*

I was sailing on an origami boat in the beginning of my voyage. My boat looked fancy, as though it was made with fine Japanese *washi* paper. I believed that I was prepared with my teaching credentials. But, I lost control of my boat two months after I began working with children. The boat easily sank when children played rough on the first snowy day in October 2014. My journal entry from October 21 states that:

*I knew that the children were excited about the snow, but I tried to keep the children in the same area...I should have let them enjoy their first snow day instead of keeping them in one small play area...or I should have made the rules clear before going out. If only I had the language skills to do that...When we went back inside; there was chaos. I was in complete panic. I had no control over children!*

Some three-year-old boys wanted to play in the snow while I was panicking about not knowing the level of the children's motor skills in snow. They grow up with snow, but it was my first experience with that much snow to play in. My panic seemed to have happened all of a sudden, but reflecting on my experience through my teaching journal later, there were some signs that I was not aware of at that time.

I did not know that children could play as wild as a storm. I could not do my job as a professional. I felt that I was in a professional identity crisis. However, I knew that the *washi* paper was durable. A day after my origami boat sank, I coincidentally met my critical friend Hafdís at the university. She asked me how I was doing at my new job. I honestly expressed my feelings of defeat on the snowy day. After listening, Hafdís questioned how I observed children. I was afraid of children because I did not know about them. My journal entry on October 22 shows how Hafdís opened my eyes to children and the door to self-study.

*Hafdís mentioned that my conflict could be a part of self-study and I should keep my notes of children's behaviour. Does it matter the time of the day? Some special occasion? I thought that I would need to get rid off the Japanese cultural perspective while working...But she says that there should be a way to find some point that this Japanese perspective is necessary.*

I was desperate to find a way to sail the boat without drowning. I began questioning myself in my journal right after the incident.

*In my understanding, teacher's role is to provide an appropriate environment for children to feel they are learning something while having fun. I am always looking at the clock, try to finish things in certain time (of course I need it), I have not really thought about their interests. What are they interested? Would I gain my confidence if I could stimulate their interests?*

Although my voyage was hard, I am the sailor of my boat. If I could rebuild the boat better, how would it be? I kept reflecting to continue my sailing.

## *Rowing Boat*

Reflection kept me thinking about how I could sail. On April 22, 2015, when the weather outside was still rough and the teaching was tough, I was asked to sit in a circle of 25 girls aged three to five for 15 minutes. My boat was not fixed yet, but I had to do something. When I sat in front of the children, I began singing the Japanese children's song *Ito-maki*, or wind the bobbin up in English. I was simply struggling not to drown. The children's eyes were fixed on me. Soon they were copying my hand movements. Some even began singing along. The tune also exists in Icelandic, so they were familiar with it. Later that day, I reflected on this incident in my journal:

*When I began singing in Japanese, they were just silent for a few moment. But soon began following me and actually singing together! Especially Sif, Þóra and Edda loved it and they were so good at copying me. I did not think this can be such fun for them...The movement is simple and the song is familiar to them.*

It was almost the first time that I felt some sort of positive response from the children. Until then, I did not have any confidence in my position as a substitute educator. I was struggling with how I could do my work as a professional. I tended to blame this on my lack of Icelandic proficiency. The truth was that I needed to believe in myself and use my resources, such as my knowledge, experience, and skills. This experience made me become aware of how my Japanese resources could be material for building a stronger boat.

Reflecting on my first experiment with the Japanese song made me realize that I was gaining more confidence in sailing a boat built with my Japanese resources. Until then, I was always insecure about whether or not I was doing something

wrong. Being Japanese, I was afraid of making mistakes. In my Japanese upbringing, I had been told that if you made a mistake, you would lose out. But when I tried to understand what kind of activities would interest the children, my fear of making mistakes was almost forgotten. I had to believe in myself and my resources. The priority at work changed from doing things right for me to doing them right for the children. But, what is right for the children? They should enjoy their time at school. On May 12, 2015, closer to the end of the school year, I expressed my feeling of success.

*I was thinking about making flour dough clay with three year old boys, but when I asked them what they wanted to do, they all said 'painting!' simultaneously. I decided to respect their interest and changed my plan. When I asked them if they wanted to use their fingers to paint, they all looked very excited. It was a right decision. They asked for different colors and I gave each of them a dish with color paints. Soon they mixed colors, it was more like playing with colors, not painting. I thought it was OK to let them just play with colors.*

If my plan would have been rejected six months ago, I would have been in a serious panic. My teaching journal was full of negative thoughts for a long time, but I kept writing and thinking about how I could survive. I was struggling, but reflection let me discover my resources, build the boat with those resources, and row it with my own agency. The spontaneous coloring activity was messy, and the children were covered with all sorts of paint. I was not afraid because I knew that they were learning something through this experience. My position as a substitute educator enabled me to observe different groups and experience different activities. Moreover, we were getting to know each other better. I was finally getting some peace of mind in my teaching. Theory and my practical experience linked together how children learn through play. Things began to make better sense to me. I even concluded my journal entry of the day with:

*I could have even let them color the bathroom mirrors. Maybe next time.*

The more I believed in my potential as a sailor, the stronger my boat became. While drifting on the rough waves of teaching, my Japanese resilience supported my sailing. Although the Japanese education system did not fit me, my foundation as an educator was fostered in the Japanese educational values of competition. My professional identity as a Japanese immigrant educator empowered me to become a resilient sailor and builder who utilizes professional resources to build a stronger boat to keep sailing. My boat was no longer a fragile origami boat. I transformed it into a strong rowing boat that I could row in the direction I wished.

## *I Have the Tools and the Critical Friend*

While rebuilding the boat of my experience, I realized that I needed to have tools that could transform the shape of my boat into anything I wished. If I wished to put the pieces of the boat together by using my cultural and professional resources, the tools mattered. The tools could be my courage, wisdom, and theoretical knowledge. Sometimes, I needed a hammer of courage to challenge myself in a new situation. I used my wisdom to facilitate the children's collaborative play. Theoretical knowledge was a compass that indicated the direction, and I navigated the boat to the new horizon of teaching.

Besides the tools, I discovered that sailing with a critical friend made my voyage more enjoyable and challenging in a positive way. When I came to the image of building the boat and wrote it up to express my transformation, I believed that I would be the boat itself. However, my critical friend Hafdís asked me a critical question. In our communication through messenger, she asked me:

*Who is then building the boat if you are the boat?...I feel that you are the sailor that builds the boat and sails it; the boat is your experience or your job.*

I was confused when Hafdís pointed out that I could be the sailor. Upon some reflection, I responded to her message:

*Your point is that I can't be a boat if I have to rebuild and transform. That's why you say I am the sailor? I am sitting in the boat, and the boat changes into different shapes through experiences...*

Hafdís responded:

*Yes and you also become better at sailing it.*

When Hafdís said that I became better at sailing it, it made much better sense to me. Because of the idea of transformation, I was stuck with the image of changing myself visually. But I needed to be the one who took the initiative in transforming my experiences. When the boat was made with origami paper, preschool administrators and colleagues simply admired how I looked. My practical experience in the Icelandic preschool context was not rich enough to strengthen the durability of the boat. I was simply floating on the sea without any agency. When I became aware of my resources and built the rowboat, I gained more confidence to row it by myself. By being on the boat myself, my experiences would not be transformative. Through critical dialogue with my critical friend, I found my agency to keep sailing.

## Conclusion

My first year of teaching in an Icelandic preschool was the most evocative period of my professional career. When my teaching journal was full of negative words, I encountered self-study and learned that negative thinking could be transformed through reflection. With the support of a critical friend, I realized that my cultural and professional resources were important parts of me as an educator. I became empowered.

Throughout my narrative self-study, I experienced the power of metaphors that let me express the subtleness and complexity of my voyage (Munby & Russell, 1990). I am the resilient sailor who navigates the boats of experience. I build the boat with my resources and my agency works as a tool. My experience is personal, and the bicultural context makes my challenges even more complex. Metaphors let me conceptualize struggles that were hard to describe in words (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). My metaphors of being a sailor and builder of my boat with resources embody my understanding of challenges but also helps others to understand with their hearts (East et al., 2009). Thinking of my teaching experience through metaphors, I could generate new ways of understanding who I am and how I work with children (MacKinnon & Bullock, 2016).

Powerful metaphors keep me sailing and my boat keeps transforming. My story might be inspiring to others who also experience a professional identity crisis. Because each experience is unique, the power of metaphors can empower any educators who do not know how to build a boat and sail it on their seas of teaching.

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