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September 15, 2020

Figures of Thought Metaphor

Thinking Inside the Box:

A Personal Analysis of Genius in Children

“Think outside the box:” a phrase we are told repeatedly throughout primary school. A cogent combination of words which commands us to turn away from a metaphorical box in favor of new and original ideas. Inside the box is routine and monochromatism; outside the box is color and exceptionality. But while this is an expression we hear frequently, it is rarely put into practice when the school system aims to reward “genius” behaviour. A child could be extremely creative and see things from many different perspectives, but if they do not do well on tests they will never be considered “intelligent” in the eyes of the system. They must learn to think inside the box.

Elementary school is an interesting time for everyone; it is the biggest period of growth for a human as it is where you learn the basics of everything you know now. It is also probably the first time you are told to “think outside the box.” Some necessary inside-the-box skills you must learn, however, are how to read and how to do math. Throughout elementary school you are tested on those abilities as well. Somebody somewhere wants to make sure you can do math and read, so you take these tests and there is a chance that you perform well enough to be placed into “gifted” programs. A separation begins to appear: you are either gifted or you are not. This genius could be compared to a lightbulb: it is on or it is off. But this common genius metaphor is damaging in more ways than one, and this relationship between metaphor and genius is explored

more in Kristen C. Elmore and Myra Luna-Lucero's article: "Light Bulbs or Seeds? How Metaphors for Ideas Influence Judgments About Genius." In this article, the authors claim that "Fixed mind-sets engender the belief that effort cannot alter performance outcomes; thus, success that does not come quickly or easily seems unlikely and unchangeable" (Elmore and Luna-Lucero 201). This is a claim that I experienced first hand throughout my early developmental days. I never "performed" well on tests, and when I did it was on parts of the test that were more abstract. This was demonstrated on a gifted test I took in third grade. I did not perform well enough on the math and reading parts to be considered for the gifted program in the same way as the other kids, but I did perform well enough on another part: the spatial reasoning part. In other words, I did well at the visual puzzles, and it was with this ability that I was allowed admittance into the gifted program that year.

Fifth grade comes around and with it comes time for another important test. The superiors would like to know if I am cut out for the "Advanced Content" classes of middle school; unsurprisingly, my test results say I am not. I am placed in "On Level" classes in my first year of middle school and this is where interpretations of a "genius" really start to show. To my classmates in On Level, I was a certified lightbulb-over-the-head genius: I could answer questions quickly and I did well on the exams. What they did not see was the hard work I put in to learning the material so I would be ready for class. And this is why the lightbulb metaphor is a damaging metaphor for genius. Kristen C. Elmore and Myra Luna-Lucero stated that, "Although intuitively appealing and memorable, such metaphors may recast what was in fact years of effort as the uncontrollable product of circumstance" (200), and I couldn't agree more. Never has there been a "lightbulb moment" without some research before or after the fact, but this metaphor implies that genius is something that happens in an instant and without any preparation. Many

kids are led to believe that they are inherently a genius or not and this is simply a lie perpetuated by a bad metaphor.

What adds to the intrigue of this metaphor is while the On Level students saw myself as a regular light-bulb genius, my Advanced Content peers did not. Due to my hard work, I was able to be placed into all “Advanced” classes in eighth grade, but I still did not feel like I had found my home. Many of the AC kids did not consider me as such because I had shown up later and did not test into the classes like most of them did. To them I was the seed interpretation of genius. The “seed” metaphor implies intelligence is something that requires time and effort to procure, but, as proven by Kristen C. Elmore and Myra Luna-Lucero, this metaphor is seen as less extraordinary than its luminous counterpart. The light-bulb “implies that good ideas are limited to a select group of geniuses, [so] one may be discouraged from engaging in creative thinking in the first place or continuing one’s effort if success does not occur quickly or easily.” (Elmore and Luna-Lucero 206). The light-bulb sets a standard no single person could meet. Which leads me to another point. “Genius” is often made up of a team of people and not one extraordinary person because everyone has their own separate talents and perspectives to offer the team. No one person is a light-bulb at everything; instead we are light-bulbs at some and plants at others. Just because something takes a little longer to master does not mean you should give up, because if you give up you will never learn what you can truly achieve.

Metaphor is not simply a tool to be used by poets and politicians alike, but rather a complex pathway of one’s thoughts that allow them to further understand a concept more deeply. Generally, metaphors can be considered a positive tool for their ability to create connections in thought, but as Kristen C. Elmore and Myra Luna-Lucero have proven, not all metaphors are created equal. Every metaphor has the ability to hide alternative interpretations of a concept and

the metaphor used could be forcing people to see a topic in a damaging way. It is our job to question the origin and shortcomings of common metaphors to ensure they are continuing to encourage positive change. I close my narrative with a symbol that combines both the seed and light-bulb metaphors. In my senior year Biology class, I performed an experiment to determine how an electric field affects the germination rate of pea plants. In this symbol, both the genius metaphors are present: the “seed” in the pea plants and the “light-bulb” in the electric field. It was a huge experiment that took a total of about two months just to prepare and perform. The interesting part was the conclusion. The experiment demonstrated that when put under an electric field, the pea plants grew faster in the first two days, but for the rest of the trial they slowed down and eventually the seeds without the electric field grew taller. I ask you: Could this symbol be applied to life as we experience it?

Works Cited

Elmore, Kristen C., and Myra Luna-Lucero. "Light Bulbs or Seeds? How Metaphors for Ideas Influence Judgments About Genius." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, vol. 8, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 200–208, doi:10.1177/1948550616667611.