

A Metaphorological Interpretation of the Educator Spirit and Its Practical Function

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Abstract: This article, based on the realization of the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, comprehensively expounds from six aspects what constitutes the unique spirit of an educator in China. To deepen the understanding of the meaning of the spirit of educators, based on the theory of metaphor, the author intends to construct a metaphor for the spirit of educators. By grasping the important discourse on education by leaders, educational works, authoritative public news and other text collections, the author aims to appreciate the traditional culture of the teaching profession and the background of the construction of the teaching staff in the new era. Combined with practical experience and the intuition of scholars, Specific meanings such as “anchor” and “beacon” were selected from the source domain, and the “six major metaphors” were constructed strictly in accordance with the principle of system mapping, with the aim of providing a new perspective for understanding and promoting the spirit of educators.

Keywords: The spirit of educators; Metaphorical interpretation; Practical function

Online publication: December 31, 2025

1. Introduction

To deliver education that satisfies the people, it is essential to clarify within our spiritual lineage “what spirit should guide educational development.” The educator spirit embodies not only the values and character upheld by outstanding teachers, highlighting the sacred nature of education, but also serves as a guiding force in the construction of an education powerhouse. It represents a refined and distinctive expression of Chinese discourse. To advance the initiative of cultivating the educator spirit and strengthening the teaching force, it is crucial for both teachers and the public to grasp its unique connotations. The key to such understanding lies in “language.” In his important discourses on education, the General Secretary employed expressions such as “posting challenges and appointing champions” and “fastening the first button of life correctly,” illustrating how metaphor allows educational theory to both “rise to the level of abstraction” and “remain grounded in practice”^[1]. The “educator spirit metaphor,” constructed on the foundation of metaphor theory, uses vivid imagery and systematic mapping to convey the rich connotations of this spirit in an accessible and publicly resonant manner—

making profound ideas both relatable and tangible. This approach offers a unique perspective for interpreting the educator spirit. Through this framework, teachers and the public can more effectively participate in all aspects of the campaign to promote the educator spirit and enhance the teaching profession. The goal is to distill, elevate, and harness the powerful energy of this spirit to advance the development of a high-quality, professional teaching force in the new era, thereby solidifying the foundation for building an education powerhouse ^[2,3].

2. Metaphorical basis for interpreting the educator spirit

2.1. The concept and characteristics of metaphor

Metaphor is a form of non-literal expression ^[4]. Following the publication of “Metaphors We Live By” by linguist Lakoff and philosopher Johnson in 1980, conceptual metaphor theory was refined and expanded by numerous scholars in cognitive linguistics, stimulating extensive academic discourse ^[5]. This led to a broader understanding of metaphor as a phenomenon that transcends mere linguistic expression. It is recognized as a cognitive mechanism—a conceptual way through which humans comprehend the world. The historical significance of metaphors lies in their reflection of the modes of thought and worldviews characteristic of specific periods. Greater attention should be directed toward the role of imaginative wholeness in conceptual construction—beyond the precise definition and generative mechanisms of metaphors. From a conceptual perspective, the metaphorical method involves using “this thing” to signify “that thing,” where the two share intrinsic connections and similar attributes ^[6]. In conceptual metaphor theory, “this thing,” “that thing,” and “the connection” correspond to the source domain, target domain, and the cross-domain systematic mapping, respectively. Metaphorical thinking represents one of humanity’s fundamental ways of understanding the world. Within rhetoric, metaphors operate through figurative reasoning and comparison on a conceptual basis. They facilitate knowledge transfer, enhance linguistic expression, and strengthen cognitive and interpretive capacities, ultimately serving the persuasive aims of rhetoric ^[7].

The figurative expressions emphasized in metaphorical discourse arise from the intrinsic relationship between similarity and mapping. Depending on how this relationship is manifested, metaphors exhibit two key characteristics: systematicity and coherence. On the one hand, metaphors are systematic. This systematic nature is a fundamental attribute of metaphorical concepts themselves; hence, the linguistic expressions that elaborate these concepts must also be systematic. People employ structured linguistic expressions to reflect the essential patterns of cognitive concepts. On the other hand, metaphors exhibit coherence. This is primarily reflected in the consistency between a metaphor and its cultural context, whereby the metaphor transfers the cultural values embedded in the source domain concepts. Embodied philosophy suggests that human conceptual systems and modes of thought are grounded in experiences within natural and social environments, which exhibit substantial commonalities ^[8].

Thus, the construction of metaphorical meaning provides the key to understanding dual referentiality. The insufficiency of literal interpretation prompts the emergence of metaphorical meaning. In this process, the logical foundation of conceptual metaphor lies in humans’ continuous acquisition of experience through bodily perception, interaction with the environment, and sensory engagement. This gives rise to metaphorical thinking, which in turn generates subjectively nuanced metaphorical expressions. Therefore, the subjective agency of humans must be central to this process.

2.2. Metaphor analysis in education

First, metaphors are widely employed in educational contexts to clarify instructional content and assist learners

in constructing accurate cognitive frameworks. As stated in “The Book of Rites • Xue Ji”: “The teaching of the noble man is through metaphor”. Metaphors used in curriculum and teaching possess significant pedagogical value: they stimulate student interest, improve comprehension of subject matter, foster moral education, and bridge the sciences and humanities. This pedagogical application of metaphor extends across all disciplines. Through metaphors, educators transform abstract ideas or disciplinary concepts into tangible images or actions, thereby building a “bridge” for intellectual exchange between teachers and learners.

Additionally, teacher image metaphors—which tend to function as “attribute metaphors”—represent a classical application of metaphor in education. These metaphors reflect societal consensus and cultural symbols associated with the image of teachers, embodying social expectations and psychological identification with the teacher’s role and position. They constitute a form of spiritual wealth and life philosophy accumulated through long-term historical and cultural development ^[9]. Dominant teacher metaphors shape educators’ beliefs, which in turn affect their teaching methods. Metaphors applied to educational elements, such as curriculum content, teacher-student relationships, and instructional materials, also reveal teachers’ pedagogical attitudes and convictions. Educators are, first and foremost, teachers whose professional identity requires them to be both producers and transmitters of knowledge ^[10]. Those who embody and continually practice the spirit of an educator can truly grow into the role. Given this relationship, the metaphorical image of teachers can serve as a crucial reference for interpreting the essence of the educator spirit, and metaphor itself can function as a theoretical method for elucidating its meaning.

2.3. Constituent elements of the educator spirit metaphor

Analyzing the constituent elements and systemic relationships of the metaphor of educator spirit is essential for correctly interpreting its connotations through metaphor theory.

First, the source domain is a collection of conceptual domains used to metaphorically represent the educator spirit. It constructs semantic connections through literal entities and their extended meanings, linking them to existing cognitive experiences. As previously noted, metaphor as a rhetorical device ultimately aims to “persuade,” meaning the source domain must constitute a conceptual field formed by the target audience’s existing experiences, beliefs, and familiar concrete entities. As a vessel for meaning, metaphor cannot exist independently of context or the speaker. The source domain of the educator spirit metaphor also originates from embodied interactions within complex social and cultural structures, carrying cultural beliefs and values. Therefore, when depicting the educator image through metaphor, one should avoid negative cultural symbols from the source domain that may reinforce stereotypes, instead creating a novel and poetic discourse system.

Second, the target domain is the object requiring interpretation—the abstract encapsulation of the educator spirit. It constitutes a conceptual field composed of unfamiliar, collective ideas about the educator spirit, representing the “complexity” component of the structure. The educator spirit is rooted in national soil, embodying national character. It is the spiritual fruit formed through the fusion and collision of educational thought across past, present, and future generations, permeated with educational consensus from different eras. It manifests not only in educational practices but also in the non-rational dimensions of educational phenomena—such as personality traits, psychological dispositions, aesthetic sensibilities, value systems, and behavioral patterns. The target domain of the educator spirit encompasses the collective educational practices, conceptual frameworks, and cultural dimensions of educators within a cultural context. It embodies the inherent spiritual ethos and humanistic power projected by the educator spirit onto educational phenomena themselves.

Finally, systemic mapping serves as the pivotal connecting unit within the metaphor of the educator spirit.

Based on similarities between the source domain and target domain, it expresses a relatively less explicit meaning through a comparable concrete reality and its extended connotations, thereby designating one thing as another^[11]. The specific context of the education spirit metaphor must reveal a systematic mapping process. The connections in this mapping can be direct, extended meanings, or action-based associations. It uses concrete, explicit, and expansive content familiar to the public to map relatively abstract and ambiguous characteristics. In this mapping process, the source domain content is more easily understood than the target domain concept requiring interpretation, creating a sense of “intuitive grasp.” This exemplifies the metaphorical function of language in expressing ideas and concepts.

3. A metaphorical interpretation of the educator spirit

From the perspective of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and building a “dream team” of dream-makers for the Chinese nation, General Secretary Xi Jinping provided a concise, logical, and systematic elaboration of the essence of China’s unique educator spirit across six dimensions. This exposition not only fully acknowledges the contributions of educators to national revitalization but also reflects the high priority placed by the state on education, serving as a powerful source of inspiration and motivation for educators. To deepen the understanding of the educator spirit, this paper constructs a metaphorical framework based on metaphor theory. Thus, by analyzing the General Secretary’s important discourses on education, educational treatises, and authoritative public news texts, we grasp both the traditional culture of the teaching profession and the context of building a teaching force for the new era. Integrating practical experience with scholarly intuition, we selected concrete images such as “anchor” and “beacon” from the source domain. Adhering strictly to the principle of systematic mapping, we constructed “six major metaphors” to offer new perspectives for understanding and promoting the educator spirit.

3.1. The anchor metaphor: An ideal of serving the greater good and dedicating oneself to the nation

“The educator spirit is akin to a ship’s anchor, mooring educators’ steadfast belief in diligently cultivating the educational field and grounding their hearts in the nation. It motivates them to fulfill the historical mission and the trust of our time bestowed upon all teachers by the Party and the people, establishing the lofty aspiration that education serves as a driving force for social progress and national rejuvenation.”

The “anchor” is a metaphorical image commonly associated with stability, security, steadfastness, and loyalty. By securing a ship’s position, an anchor prevents drifting or loss of control. Across global literature and cultural contexts, the anchor often symbolizes resoluteness and stability. It reflects the core values deeply embedded within one’s heart, resisting external pressures through firm belief to stay on course. The “anchor metaphor” draws from the source domain of the anchor to represent the target domain of the educator spirit—namely, “an ideal of serving the greater good and dedicating oneself to the nation.” It illustrates that the work of education is like sailing a ship through waves: while pursuing lofty ideals, educators must also shoulder their responsibilities and anchor their aspirations with unwavering conviction. The concept of the “career anchor,” introduced by renowned psychologist and organizational management scholar Edgar H. Schein, uses the anchor metaphor to signify the essential values or principles that individuals refuse to compromise when making career choices^[12].

3.2. The beacon metaphor: Moral integrity that exemplifies scholarly conduct and sets a model for society

“The educator spirit is a beacon that ignites moral flame through noble aspirations and conduct. It embodies the inner quality of self-cultivation through tranquility, radiating the principle that ‘when one’s conduct is upright, no orders are necessary.’ It guides students through life’s uncertainties and illuminates their path forward.”

The “beacon” is a common yet profoundly meaningful metaphor. In Buddhism, it symbolizes light and wisdom. The “beacon metaphor” employs the source domain of the beacon to represent the educator spirit in the target domain—namely, “moral integrity that exemplifies scholarly conduct and sets a model for society.” This reflects how educators, much like beacons, cultivate virtue within and radiate brilliance outwardly.

Many Western thinkers have also drawn on the extended meanings of “light” or “illumination” associated with the beacon to articulate profound educational insights. Herbart, focusing on educational guidance, emphasized that instruction should ignite the “second spark” through the “first spark” ^[13]. Sukhomlinsky likened teachers to “guiding lights,” describing them as not only the “first” but also the “principal” beacon in students’ intellectual lives ^[14]. Diesterweg compared teachers to “torches,” arguing that educators must become “the true torch of reason and enlightenment” ^[15].

3.3. The seedling nurturing metaphor: Educational wisdom that enlightens minds, nurtures hearts, and tailors instruction to individual aptitudes

“The essence of the educator spirit lies in the devoted nurturing of seedlings. With pedagogical wisdom, educators foster young minds, applying tailored approaches according to each seedling’s unique characteristics. They enlighten intellect and cultivate character, enabling these seedlings to grow into ‘fine timber’ and ‘blossoming flowers’ that enhance our nation’s magnificent landscape.”

The “seedling nurturing” metaphor embodies profound pedagogical wisdom and reflects an educational philosophy centered on attentive and individualized nurturing. As General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, educating children is akin to planting trees: they must be guided upright from the beginning to prevent crooked growth ^[16]. Ye Shengtao observed that education is not akin to industrial manufacturing but rather resembles the careful, deliberate work of traditional agriculture. Teaching and nurturing are not about mass-producing uniform outputs; instead, they are comparable to a farmer sowing seeds and tending to seedlings. This process requires setting appropriate educational goals, selecting suitable content, and applying fitting methods to promote students’ holistic development ^[17]. Dewey advocated that “education is growth,” positing that children possess both plasticity and an innate, proactive capacity for development ^[18]. The “seedling nurturing” metaphor underscores the distinctive wisdom educators exercise in cultivating talent. It entails creating optimal environmental conditions and providing fertile ground for growth based on each “seedling’s” developmental patterns, using scientifically informed methods to support student development. This pedagogical wisdom is rooted in solid scholarship and profound reflective practice, nourished by deep disciplinary knowledge and strong teaching competence. With a comprehensive understanding of both subject matter and student individuality, educators—guided by a macro perspective that connects historical insight with contemporary relevance and future vision—foster a learning environment rich in inspiration and innovation.

3.4. The canal-digging metaphor: A diligent, steadfast, truth-seeking, and innovative approach to scholarly pursuit

“The educator spirit is akin to digging a canal with one’s own hands—it requires ‘personally wading into the

river to gauge its depth’ and diligently seeking truth to uncover educational insights. It entails adhering to facts and grounding one’s work in reality, while also adopting an innovative mindset to ‘draw in fresh water to nourish education,’ thereby sparking educational inspiration and boldly pursuing change.”

The “canal-digging metaphor” employs action-oriented imagery, necessitating an analysis of both the action itself and its purpose to fully grasp the metaphorical mapping. “Digging” refers to the physical act of carving out a channel with tools such as hammers and chisels, with the ultimate goal of enabling water to flow. This process demands hands-on involvement and steadfast perseverance. The metaphor maps the action of “digging” from the source domain onto the target domain of “the essence of learning lies in practice,” while its purpose implicitly conveys the innovative spirit encapsulated in the notion of “fresh water”—that is, “transforming the old and actively pursuing renewal.” This aligns with the “diligent, steadfast, truth-seeking, and innovative approach to scholarly pursuit.”

“The new era must harness innovation to fuel the momentum of civilizational development and activate the fresh waters that sustain its progress”^[19]. Thus, educators must become pragmatic pioneers who carve out channels of dedicated teaching and channel the fresh waters of scholarly innovation. From the symbolic significance of hydraulic engineering projects such as the Ling Canal and the Red Flag Canal in history and culture, innovation and perseverance, life and hope have come to form the spiritual foundation of the “canal-digging metaphor.” As the saying goes, “ask the canal how it remains so clear—it is because fresh water flows from its source.” The “canal-digging metaphor” embodies a practical attitude of steadfast commitment to the teaching profession, seeking truth through pragmatic means, and pursuing bold innovation. Learning must be a continuous pursuit.

3.5. The chalk metaphor: A benevolent heart that finds joy in teaching and devotion to students

“The educator spirit is like chalk: it inscribes educational knowledge, outlines the joy of teaching, conveys profound dedication to instruction and deep care for students, and embodies selfless devotion to education. It regards education as both a lifelong vocation and a perpetual pursuit.”

Chalk is an everyday object, familiar, tangible, and functional, designed to be consumed in the act of writing. Mapping chalk from the source domain to the target domain of “educator spirit,” a benevolent heart that finds joy in teaching and devotion to students, facilitates a contextual understanding through metaphorical extension, grounded in the systematic nature of metaphor theory. Writing educational knowledge represents the “life” of chalk; its “mission” is to devote itself entirely to education. Educators who treat teaching as their mission do so out of genuine love for education, transcending utilitarian motives and artificial gestures.

Gray hair weaves through days and nights, while silent chalk writes the seasons. The “chalk metaphor” conveys a spirit of untiring dedication and wholehearted commitment—one that fulfills personal value and leaves a lasting educational legacy. “Dedication,” however, should not be mistaken for blind sacrifice. Teachers must nurture the motivation and sentiment behind dedication, anchoring it in love and responsibility as its emotional foundation. Benevolence, a core virtue in Chinese tradition and an enduring ethos of teaching, emphasizes “enriching oneself to benefit others through selfless contribution” and “awakening souls with one’s spirit, nourishing hearts with one’s mind”^[20].

3.6. The ocean metaphor: A commitment to enlightening others through culture with a global vision

“The educator spirit is like a vast ocean, nurturing global civilizations with boundless compassion. It advances

the progress of education worldwide through waves of humanistic values, making education the current that connects human societies and carries forward our shared values.”

The ocean is boundless—not only does it carry ships upon its surface, but it also fosters diverse life and matter within its depths, symbolizing profound inclusiveness and infinite depth. The pursuit of “enlightening others through culture with a global vision” reflects the global vision of the Chinese nation, rooted in the inheritance of its excellent traditional culture. It underscores educators’ firm cultural confidence and noble aspiration to advance human civilization, addressing from a macro perspective the essential question: “What should teachers strive for?”^[21] “Scholars value broad learning above all.” Educators must develop extensive knowledge and a magnanimous spirit to guide students toward becoming well-rounded individuals. They should embrace all like the ocean, possessing not only the breadth of mind to uphold the nation’s grand ambitions, but also the steadfast dedication to deepen their learning and shoulder the profound mission of nurturing future generations. The “ocean metaphor” conveys that neither the raging waves of historical upheavals nor the turbulent undercurrents of global changes can shake educators’ unwavering resolve to advance against the current and cultivate humanity through the pursuit of truth and virtue.

4. The practical function of the educator spirit metaphor

4.1. The symbolic expression of metaphor facilitates recognition of the implications of educator spirit

Humanistic knowledge is inherently metaphorical, meaning that expressions of life’s meaning typically proceed not through logical or empirical means, but through “metaphor”—a mode that is neither strictly logical nor empirical. Without metaphor, humanistic knowledge becomes ineffable^[22]. This is especially relevant for primary and middle school teachers, for whom grasping the essence of educator spirit involves a dual challenge: a lack of cultural imagination and a shortfall in embodied cognition. The metaphor of educator spirit acts like a lever—prying open the understanding of humanistic knowledge, making it articulate, tangible, and actionable.

On the one hand, the metaphor of educator spirit visualizes language conveyed through text and sound, achieving a synesthetic transfer from the source domain to the target domain. This enhances the “audiovisual integration” of cultural imagination and lowers the threshold for comprehending the target domain. By evoking different facets of the educator spirit, the metaphor establishes resemblances with events teachers have experienced or phenomena they have perceived. These resemblances may be external and formal, or internal and conceptual. Through the mapping of specific forms and content from the source domain onto the target domain, metaphorical descriptions endow the abstract concept of educator spirit with perceptible form, opening alternative avenues for its comprehension.

On the other hand, the metaphor of the educator spirit represents an indirect mode of comprehension. Rooted in inspiration, imagination, and perception, it constitutes a system of interpretation built upon the listener’s embodied experience and cognitive condition. Unlike logical-positivist understanding, this metaphorical approach depends more fundamentally on the teacher’s judicious selection of source domain content, which in turn relies on contexts drawn from life experience. Using vivid metaphors to convey the educator spirit serves to transduce its abstract attributes into transferable semantic form. Because teachers can construct systematic mappings through divergent imagination grounded in embodied experience, and because listeners generate meaning through their own imaginative engagement, the metaphor of educator spirit employs well-chosen source domain concepts. It transforms logical, abstract, and generalized notions via figurative interpretation from the

source domain. Mediated by the teacher's imagination, this process enriches the understanding of educator's spirit with contextual, concrete, and perceptible content.

4.2. The metaphorical imagery of educator spirit shapes its value leadership

Objectively speaking, metaphor serves as an informal cultural expression that reflects people's unique perspectives on things while also embodying collective judgments and evaluations. The construction of the educator spirit metaphor encapsulates the demands, expectations, and recognition that society places upon educators in this era. It establishes the value leadership of the educator spirit primarily by shaping external perceptions of the ideal educator spirit and stimulating internal self-reflection among teachers. This process contributes to conveying compelling narratives of Chinese educators and fostering a social atmosphere that respects teachers and values education.

To a certain extent, the metaphor of educator spirit represents a social consensus on the image of educators. It embodies societal expectations and psychological identification with the role and social positioning of educators, functioning as a type of educational-cultural symbol. Within the conceptual domain shaped by long-term historical and cultural accumulation, the educator spirit evolves alongside social changes, reflecting each era's vision of the ideal teacher's character. The cultural symbolism embedded in this metaphor enriches the expression of the educator spirit, conveying societal expectations for teachers' moral qualities while shaping their professional image. By establishing the conceptual domain of this spirit, traits such as patience, responsibility, respect, tolerance, tailored instruction, and unwavering dedication are further externalized. As a cognitive facilitation mechanism, the metaphor of educator spirit underscores the noble moral sentiments of educators, emphasizing dedication and devotion. It helps shape an educator image that aligns with contemporary societal expectations, thereby strengthening the development of a high-quality, professional teaching workforce in the new era.

The external manifestation of metaphor also opens pathways for teachers to gain insight into practical knowledge and restore pedagogical imagery through reflection, adding a new dimension to their professional awareness ^[23]. From this perspective, the metaphor of educator spirit inherently carries practical guidance on how teachers should treat students, approach knowledge, and engage with their own practice. The pursuit of purity and supreme virtue within this metaphor constitutes the foundation of teaching, encouraging teachers to engage in introspective practice and achieve self-image formation. A positive and virtuous image serves both as an intrinsic spiritual need for self-preservation and as an endogenous driver for self-development ^[24]. The educator spirit metaphor helps shape the positive image of the "exemplary teacher of a great nation," providing an internal motivator for self-reflection and a benchmark for professional growth.

5. Conclusion

Overall, as a discursive form, metaphors of the educator spirit establish connections between source-domain and target-domain concepts through a deliberate "deviation" in the original meaning of words. This systematic mapping, neither wholly identical yet strikingly analogous—provides a method for grasping abstract concepts. However, when interpreting such metaphors, one must avoid exaggerating interpretive gaps. For instance, misreading the "chalk metaphor" as implying the "objectification of teachers" would distort the original intent behind the metaphor. Instead, we should utilize the educator spirit metaphor to comprehend unfamiliar, abstract concepts in the target domain through familiar, concrete elements from the source domain. Simultaneously, the

educator spirit should serve as a cognitive framework for self-reflection, helping to establish a developmental coordinate system for high-quality, professional teachers via the concrete imagery evoked by the metaphor. This approach promotes the understanding and promotion of the educator spirit, injecting spiritual strength into the initiative of forging the soul and empowering teachers in the new era.

Funding

The Educational Teaching Research and Reform Project of Beijing Union University in 2025 (Project No.: JG2025Y003); 2024 Beijing Higher Education Society Project (Project No.: MS2024359)

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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