Some Metaphors in Education

The education as banking metaphor was popularized by Paolo Frere, who argued that when educators merely engage in pouring information into learners’  heads (filling jugs) as if they were “storing” that information, instead of teaching children to THINK critically and use information to solve problems and arrive at insights about life around them, then they are basically just “banking” that information.

The teacher as sculptor metaphor is a strong, positive comparison because it suggests that the teacher thinks she/he has the power to shape learners, and bring something beautiful into existence. It also sees teacher as artist, engaged in a creative endeavour.

Comparing education to ‘growth’ is a statement about the evolving, dynamic and purpose-filled nature of education. Since growth suggests enlargement and expansion, this comparison is a positive one.

Comparing learning to acquisition suggests a deliberate and relatively permanent activity. Usually, too, people acquire something if it is seen as valuable. So, by association, learning is compared to the process of deliberately seeking out something valuable.

Teaching as “gardening” compares teachers to care givers engaged in the (slow) process of producing beautiful landscapes. In its fullest realization, the comparison suggests teachers have to perform some of the same tasks as gardeners: sowing (ideas), watering (providing supportive “food”), and pruning and weeding (eliminating students’ bad habits and influences).

What about metaphors such as school as ‘regiment’? For example, “This school is a regiment. People can’t move sideways here without permission from the bosses. Is a total lockdown.”

NEGATIVE INTERPRETATION: regimentation suggests extreme conformity to rules. Therefore, there is obliteration of individuality and, probably, loss of agency and power. Applied to teachers and teaching, a regimented school is one that discourages teacher creativity, individuality and decision-making.

POSITIVE  INTERPRETATION: given what was said above (negative connotation of regimentation), suppose that a new principal arrives in a school that has been in decline for many years. The school culture is chaotic, anything goes, and there is no accountability for students or teaching staff. Essentially, the school is failing in its mandate to educate children because of organizational dysfunctions. Can you envisage now why a “regimented” school might actually be desirable to what currently obtains (but as a short term measure to regain school functionality)?