

Metaphors of inclusive education: Conference reflections from the Global South

Susan Lee Nacey¹

*If you have to go near, walk alone
To go far, walk together*
- African proverb

Abstract

This paper examines metaphorical frameworks employed at the 2024 International Conference on Perspectives and Practices of Inclusive Education in Kathmandu, Nepal. Drawing on observations from keynote addresses, conference papers, panel discussions and informal conversations during the two-day conference, the paper reflects on the dominant metaphors present in the discourse of inclusive education in the Global South.

Metaphors are fundamental tools through which humans make sense of complex realities, operating far beyond mere linguistic decoration to shape our understanding and potentially guide our actions. For those working in inclusive education, recognizing and analyzing these metaphorical frameworks is crucial because they may subtly influence how we conceptualize challenges, develop solutions, and implement policies.

Various metaphorical frames emerged through the discussions, including BUILDING (emphasizing collaborative construction), ECONOMY (focusing on investment and costs), WAR (highlighting challenges), and SPORTS (illustrating fairness issues). On the whole, however, the JOURNEY metaphor dominated across all discourse types, consistently appearing in various forms when discussing policy implementation, educational progress, and/or change towards more inclusive and equitable education. Conference delegates thus triggered a rich image schema involving multifaceted networks of related images and concepts, which are unpacked and examined in the paper.

Keywords: Nepal, Global South, Inclusive Education, JOURNEY metaphor, Conference Reflections.

Points of interest:

- Metaphors are not just flowery language – they are basic tools we all use to understand and talk about complex ideas. At a recent conference on inclusive education in Nepal, these metaphors revealed how educators think about and approach the topic of inclusive education.
- Different metaphors highlight varying aspects of inclusive education. For example, BUILDING metaphors emphasize the need for strong foundations and collaboration, while WAR metaphors stress the difficulties and challenges involved.

¹ Corresponding author: susan.nacey@inn.no

- The most common metaphor used at the conference was that of a JOURNEY. When people talked about inclusive education as a journey, they emphasized important aspects such as the distance involved, the presence of obstacles, and the value of traveling together.
- Understanding these metaphors matters because they may shape how we think about and act on educational inclusion. They may influence everything from policy decisions to teaching practices to general attitudes about inclusion in society.

Introduction

The International Conference on Perspectives and Practices of Inclusive Education, held on 8-9 December 2024 (23-24 Mangsir 2081) in Kathmandu, Nepal, was a landmark event that brought together educators and researchers from South Asia and beyond. As a linguist and vice dean of research at University of Inland Norway, I attended the conference with a dual perspective: to represent my institution and to explore how language is used to shape discourse in inclusive education. These reflections examine the conference proceedings through a linguistic lens, focusing on the metaphors that dominated the discussions.

Conference Background

The conference, hosted by the Faculty of Education at Tribhuvan University in collaboration with Oslo Metropolitan University and the University of Inland Norway, provided a platform for critical dialogue on inclusive education with a focus on the Global South. It was organized as a milestone event in the Building Inclusive Education in Nepal Programme (BIEPN), funded through the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (for further information about BIEPN, see <https://uni.oslomet.no/norhed/biepn/>).

Delegates from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Norway and the United Kingdom shared research findings, practical strategies, and policy insights, all with a focus on equity, accessibility and diversity in education systems. Over two days, keynote speeches, plenary discussions, and technical sessions explored themes such as policy development, curriculum practices, assessment and the inclusion of students with special needs. Panel discussions highlighted grassroots inclusion practices and the challenges of implementing equitable education.

Kathmandu, a city with a long history as a crossroads where different cultures and traditions meet and learn from each other, was a fitting location for the conference. The gathering underscored the importance of shared learning and collaboration in addressing global and local challenges. It inspired participants to take actionable steps toward fostering inclusive and accessible education for all, irrespective of any disability.



Why metaphors matter

Put simply, metaphors represent “a way in which we talk, and potentially think, about something in terms of something else” (Semino, 2008, p. 1). They are not just “icing on the cake”, found only in poetry and literature. Rather, they are important because – following the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) - they represent ways that we actually conceive of the world around us. Metaphors are ubiquitous across all forms of human communication, whether in spoken or written

language (regardless of the specific language), gestures, visual imagery, or other modes of expression. This pervasive use of metaphor occurs whether or not speakers are consciously aware they are employing metaphorical language; it is simply part of how humans naturally communicate and make sense of the world.

Metaphors make complex ideas more accessible as they are “used to persuade, reason, evaluate, explain, theorize, offer new conceptualizations of reality and so on” (Semino, 2008, p. 31). They highlight certain aspects of a topic while backgrounding others. In this way, they have the potential to shape our beliefs, judgments and evaluations, subtly influencing how we think and act (Thibodeau, Hendricks, & Boroditsky, 2017).

As a consequence, the metaphors we use when talking about inclusive education matter, both for how we conceptualize challenges with implementation and for how we may approach solutions. This is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where metaphors can shape policy decisions, teaching practices, and societal attitudes toward inclusion. During the conference, several dominant metaphorical frameworks emerged in discussions, each carrying distinct implications for how we approach inclusive education. Awareness of these metaphors and their implications allows us to better understand underlying assumptions and beliefs that guide educational practices.

The metaphors of inclusive education

Throughout the conference, several key metaphorical frameworks emerged. The following examples (with the relevant metaphorical language in *italics*) were documented during conference sessions:

- BUILDING² metaphors framed inclusion as construction:
 - “political will with sustained commitment is the *foundation* to inclusive education”
 - the importance of “*peer support*”
- ECONOMY metaphors emphasized investment:
 - “inclusion is *costly*, but exclusion *costs* more”
 - “*valuing* diversity”
- WAR metaphors highlighted challenges:
 - implementation of inclusive education is “a hard *struggle*”
 - “*clashing* concepts”
- SPORTS metaphors illustrated fairness, or lack thereof:
 - unjust student assessment systems that ignore diversity and individual differences are “unfair *races*”

Such metaphorical frameworks identified at the conference carry different emotional and practical implications. BUILDING metaphors, for example, tend to evoke positive associations, emphasizing constructive collaboration and lasting progress (Charteris-Black, 2004, pp. 94-95). Just as physical structures require careful planning, solid foundations, and coordinated teamwork, the BUILDING metaphor suggests that inclusive education demands systematic effort and shared commitment to create enduring change. By contrast, WAR metaphors, while powerful in conveying urgency and highlighting obstacles, can be problematic (Nacey, 2024, p. 81). Though they effectively communicate the magnitude of challenges faced, framing inclusive education as a battle risks fostering antagonistic attitudes that may actually hinder effective collaboration.

While these metaphorical frameworks each contributed valuable perspectives to the discourse, one metaphor emerged as particularly dominant throughout the conference: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS A JOURNEY. This metaphor appeared consistently across presentations, panel discussions and informal discussions, serving as a central organizing principle for how participants conceptualized both the challenges and possibilities of inclusive education.

² Note that conceptual metaphors are written in uppercase letters, following established convention.

This finding is not unsurprising, as the JOURNEY metaphor is one of the most common metaphors, especially when it comes to goal-oriented or purposeful activities such as education, love or even life in general (Charteris-Black, 2004, pp. 92-93). The JOURNEY metaphor is highly productive: “it may well be the single most important metaphor [...] human beings use to conceptualize their personal and professional goals in life” (Forceville, 2021, p. 21).

The metaphor proves so useful partially because of the universality of journeys. After all, everyone has experienced different types of journeys in their lives, and they can rely on this background knowledge to make sense of the JOURNEY analogy. Moreover, the complexity of the JOURNEY metaphor makes it so ubiquitous, in that it allows for focus on either the figurative journey as a whole or on particular facets of that journey highlighting a specific aspect. When we use the JOURNEY metaphor, we trigger a multifaceted network of related concepts and images. This rich schema is worthwhile unpacking and examining in greater depth (see also Nacey, 2022, pp. 285-287).

At its core, the metaphor provides a fruitful source for conventional ways of talking about progress towards a goal, where the goal is conceptualized as the destinations of travelers. Consequently, the JOURNEY metaphor involves locations. We have a starting point and (usually) an end point. Although we might have had some particular final destination in mind from the beginning, we could actually end up somewhere that we had not initially anticipated. Alternatively, we might never be quite sure where we are heading; as keynote speaker Professor Basu Dev Kafle (Tribhuvan University, Nepal) asserted, “inclusion is a *long journey into the unknown*.”

For keynote speaker Professor Shyamani Hettiarachchi (University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka), the final destination of inclusive education was an abstract location: “we are striving *towards* equity and equality.” Here, the choice of the preposition is significant: *towards* encodes the meaning of “nearer and nearer, in the general direction of”, as opposed to the preposition *to* which “specifies the endpoint of a path” (Lindstromberg, 2010, p. 27). While *to* focuses primarily on the goal, *towards* focuses more on the process: the final destination may never actually be reached.

Along the way in our journey, we might stop in different places – some that we might have planned beforehand, others that might be unexpected detours. Some such places may be comfortable, perhaps tempting us to linger even longer than we should. Others may be uncomfortable, prompting us to move on as quickly as possible. Keynote speaker Professor Dr. Nidhi Singal (Cambridge University, UK) stressed that there is no one model for inclusive education, and that different countries are at different *stages* – that is, the same type of journey may unfold in diverse ways depending on the group of travelers. Professor Singal further described the changing *landscape* characteristic of inclusive education. The landscape is ever shifting because journeys imply some sort of movement. The dean of Tribhuvan University’s Faculty of Education, Professor Dr. Chitra Bahadur Budhathoki, neatly summarized this when he asserted that “inclusive education is *movement* for the education system, for creating a learning environment for all students irrespective of gender, disability, language, culture, etc.”

That movement has a certain speed. Traveling speed depends on the mode of travel (e.g. walking, driving, flying) and the quality of the path (e.g. bumpy, smooth), as well as on other factors. The pace may be rapid or slow, or may even vary throughout the journey. For instance, Professor Kafle focused on *accelerating* inclusive education in South Asia.

A journey also implies a direction of movement. Ways of reaching goals are typically conceived of as movement forward. But we can also move backwards, or become sidetracked. We can go up and down, as is necessary in difficult mountainous territory. Some of us may go around in circles and revisit the same places again.

We can get lost, but hopefully not forever. We may find our own way, or someone may guide us. The Norwegian language offers a perfect illustration of this journey-guidance connection: the word *veileder* (supervisor) literally means “one who leads the way.” A traveler may be lost without knowledgeable guidance, as there are no clear maps on figurative journeys.

Some journeys have obstacles. Many at the conference mentioned *barriers* for inclusive education, which are the same everywhere: lack of positive attitudes, lack of training, lack of resources, etc. But rather than remain focused on such obstacles, the general consensus was that we need to instead focus on what works, i.e. the enablers. Rather than fixating on barriers, we must therefore find alternative paths forward.

Although we travel alone on some journeys, we are often accompanied by fellow travelers. The African proverb that opened these reflections, cited by Professor Dr. Kafle in his keynote address, advises us that it is best to travel with others when going far. Here we thus see that journeys also imply that a distance is involved. While some journeys are short, we sometimes have to cover great distances to reach our destination. When it comes to the implementation of inclusive education, Lecturer Shahriar Panto (Asian Centre for Inclusive Education, Bangladesh) concluded that we still have *a long way to go*.

A major focus of the conference was the *gap* between theory and practice. Professor Dr. Kafle talked about the need for a *marriage* between perspective and practice, or alternatively about how policy and practice are frequently *divorced* from each other – thereby referencing an alternative metaphor to that of the journey. At the same time, he also discussed the need for *bridging* the gap, which does relate to the complex nature of journeys. Professor Mythili Ramchand (National Institute of Advanced Studies Bengaluru, India), by contrast, spoke of the need of *translating* South Asian inclusive education policies into practice, which she maintained remains a formidable task.

That we may use different metaphors (MARRIAGE, JOURNEY, TRANSLATION) in reference to the same topic (inclusive education) shows the versatility of metaphor. All three metaphors are true, understandable and useful, shedding different perspectives about the same subject. Differing metaphors may thus both complement and supplement each other so as to create a fuller picture of the phenomenon in question.

In any case, when the distance to be traveled is great – as is the case with inclusive education – then the JOURNEY metaphor also highlights the need for patience. Reaching one's final destination can take time. The heartening news, however, is the JOURNEY metaphor – unlike the WAR metaphor – is generally positive. This implies that the goals are worthwhile and that the journey is meaningful.

I wish you all safe and successful journeys.

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