

**SEEING, GRASPING AND CONSTRUCTING: PRE-SERVICE  
TEACHERS' METAPHORS FOR 'UNDERSTANDING' IN  
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

Despite its centrality to most, if not all educational endeavours, what is meant by understanding is highly contested. Using Religious Education (RE) in England as a case subject this paper examines pre-service secondary school teachers' conceptions of understanding. It does so by employing conceptual metaphor theory to analyse their linguistic discourse. Specifically, it examines the metaphors employed by participants in a series of focus group discussions (FGD) and provides important insights into how understanding is conceptualised by these pre-service teachers who are preparing to enter the RE profession. The metaphors employed by these pre-service teachers ('understanding is SEEING'; 'understanding is CONSTRUCTING'; 'understanding is GRASPING'), focus on the dynamic and developmental nature of understanding (rather than on the outcomes) and reveal subject specific ways of thinking and practicing. This paper argues that each of the three conceptual metaphors employed by participants suggest particular ways of acting towards understanding with significant implications for teaching and learning in RE.

Keywords: understanding; metaphor; metaphor analysis; religious education; pre-service teachers; initial teacher education.

## **Introduction**

Reflecting on his experience of teaching university students about the importance of deep learning, Noel Entwistle (2009, 45) recalls how one student's question, *'but what do you mean by understanding?'* stopped him in his tracks and sent him 'stumbling towards an answer that convinced nobody'. He subsequently 'trawled through books to find a better answer' and was disappointed to discover that understanding was generally considered 'too broad a concept to be investigated' (Entwistle 2009, 45). A similar experience was reported by Wiggins and McTighe (2005, 35) when working with curriculum designers which prompted them to 'pause and consider a question that turns out to be essential: How well do we understand understanding?' The answer to which appears to be, 'not at all clearly' (Entwistle, 2009, 45).

'Not at all clearly' seems an unusual position to be in, particularly in the field of education, where understanding is central to most, if not all, educational endeavours. What is meant by understanding is contested (Ross 2018). What exactly is understanding? What does it mean to understand why something is the case or how something has come about? What are the necessary conditions for understanding? How is understanding experienced? Questions such as these, which focus explicitly on 'what we now call understanding' (Baumberger et al 2017, 2) rather than on the hitherto preoccupation with knowledge (Mason 2003), have become a prominent albeit fairly recent concern for modern epistemologists (Baumberger et al 2017). This quest to understand understanding should also be of primary concern to those involved in education (Janvid 2014; Newton 2012; Nickerson 1985; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). After all, if we are going to put understanding 'up front and on the centre' of the

educational stage, ‘we had better know what we are aiming at’ (Perkins, 1998, 39). If we do not know what counts as understanding, how can we teach *for* understanding, and how can we know when a student has achieved it? (Walshe and Teece 2013).

This paper presents one such attempt to better understand ‘understanding’ in an educational context. Specifically, this paper explores pre-service secondary school teachers’ understandings of understanding in Religious Education (RE) in England. The study focuses exclusively on the case of Religious Education as previous research has identified a number of issues associated with understanding in RE, for instance: a) the tendency of students to equate understanding with believing (Freathy and Alyward 2010); b) the possibility or impossibility of outsider understanding (Walshe and Teece 2013); and c) the objectification of religious and non-religious worldviews as objects of study (Hannam and Biesta 2019). Thus this particular discipline provides a unique opportunity to consider a number of complex issues surrounding what might be meant by understanding in education, including the extent to which understanding may be domain specific (as argued, for instance, by Newton 2012 and Entwistle 2009) or generic across the curriculum.

### ***Understanding ‘understanding’***

An obvious place to start with this quest is to consider what we already know about understanding. It is evident from general everyday discourse that the term ‘understanding’ carries many meanings. Understanding may be used to refer to the ability to comprehend, grasp or perceive an item of knowledge; denote agreement, an arrangement or contract; confirm awareness of something; allude to a person’s sympathetic and considerate nature; express empathy and compassion; and infer belief

(Wimmer and Gschaidner 2000). That we use this one word to refer to a variety of mental conditions that can mean different things in different contexts (Newton 2012) and apply it to a range of targets, e.g. concepts; situations and persons (White and Gunstone 1992) contributes to the difficulty in defining it. Part of the problem is that the grammar of the concept plays tricks on us (Smeyers (2009) in that ‘understanding’ may be a verb (e.g. ‘he understood why she said that’); a noun (e.g. ‘they came to an understanding’); and an adjective (e.g. ‘she was very understanding’). Moreover, even when we appear to be talking about understanding in the same context (e.g. as an educational goal), it is not clear whether we are referring to ‘objectual understanding’, that is *understanding of* the subject matter; ‘propositional understanding’, *understanding that* something is the case; ‘explanatory understanding,’ *understanding why* something is the case; or ‘performative understanding’, the *ability to act* as a consequence of understanding (Grimm et al 2017). The multiplicity of ways in which this term is employed and interpreted makes it very difficult to arrive at definitive conclusions concerning what exactly is meant by ‘understanding’.

In spite of the complexity of the task however, recent years have witnessed a resurgence in theorising about the nature of understanding in both philosophy (see for example Chart 2000; Grimm et al 2017; Mason 2003; Ross 2018) and education (see for example Cat 2011; Davson-Galle 2004; Grimm 2011; Janvid 2014; Newman 2001; Newton 2012; Smith and Siegel 2004; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). The accounts produced have explored a number of key questions and issues, including:

- Is there one such thing named ‘understanding’ or several types of understanding? (e.g. Baumberger et al 2017).
- What is the relationship between understanding and truth? (e.g. Strevens 2017).

- What is the relationship between understanding and knowledge (e.g. Le Bihan 2017; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). According to Ross (2018), debates concerning the relationship between understanding and knowledge represent one of the most prominent themes in the literature.
- What is the relationship between understanding and belief? (e.g. Wilkenfield 2017).
- What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding? (e.g. Baumberger et al 2017).
- What capacities are indicative of understanding? (e.g. Chart 2000; Mason 2003; Newton 2012; Smith and Siegel 2004; Wiggins and McTighe 2005; Ziff 1972);

What is clear is that there no consensus concerning what might be meant by understanding (Baumberger et al 2017). Accounts vary depending on the form or aspect of understanding under scrutiny, for example: objectual (understanding of) or causal/explanatory/interrogative (understanding why). Given the problematic nature of the endeavour, Mason (2003) concludes that any attempt to provide a comprehensive account of what might be meant by understanding will not lead to a valuable theory as it's hard to see what sort of account of understanding would satisfy. Indeed, some have argued that previous attempts to provide coherent and comprehensive accounts of understanding are part of the problem. Rather than furthering our understanding, the resulting definitions, have contributed to the current limited appreciation of understanding in teaching, learning and assessment (White and Gunstone 1992), as evidenced by the lack of clarity found in much education curricular documentation where the terms 'knowledge' and 'understanding' are frequently employed loosely, ambiguously and interchangeably (Huxster et al 2018; Smith and Siegel 2004).

### *Understanding 'understanding' in Religious Education*

Religious Education in England provides a particularly interesting case subject within which to explore what might be meant by 'understanding', sitting as it does within the 'basic' rather than the 'National' curriculum (Long et al 2019). First, the fact that the RE curriculum is locally rather than nationally determined<sup>i</sup> increases the potential for inconsistency and confusion regarding how 'understanding' is understood in RE in secondary schools in England. Second, the resulting number and diversity of agreed syllabuses for RE means that the task of providing a comprehensive overview of the RE curriculum in secondary schools in England is beyond the scope of this paper, which would not be the case for any component subject of the National Curriculum in England. However, by drawing upon existing non-statutory guidance, such as the non-statutory national curriculum framework for RE (NCFRE) produced by the Religious Education Council (REC) of England and Wales in 2013, designed to act as a national benchmark document for use by all those responsible for developing locally agreed syllabuses for RE (Long et al 2019, 15), it is possible to gain some insights into how 'understanding' might be understood in RE in secondary schools in England.

As with other curriculum subjects, the development of students' understanding is identified in this documentation<sup>ii</sup> as one of the key aims of RE, along with knowledge and specific skills (e.g. QCA 2004, 8; DCFS 2010, 7; REC 2013b, 6), but here, as in other curricular documentation what is meant by 'understanding' is not immediately clear. The majority of references are to objectual understanding (understanding of), and denote the object of study; that is, they identify that which students are expected to develop an understanding of, e.g. the nature of religion (DCFS 2010, 61); religions and worldviews (QCA 2004); cultures and beliefs (DCFS 2010, 8); similarities and

differences (DCFS 2010, 22); concepts (DCFS 2010, 23); ultimate questions and ethical issues (QCA 2004, 11); the significance of religions and beliefs in the world today (QCA 2004, 8; DCFS 2010, 7); what it might mean to belong to a religion or worldview (DCFS 2010, 23); and students' own beliefs and values (DCFS 2010, 41). There are no explicit references to the development of students' causal/explanatory/interrogative (understanding why).

In terms of the kind of understanding students of Religious Education in England are expected to develop, for the most part, these documents:

- Identify particular forms of understanding that RE should promote e.g. religious understanding (QCA 2004, 9); inter-personal understanding, (QCA 2004, 15; DCFS 2010, 37); social understanding (DCFS 2010, 7); and inter-faith understanding (DCFS 2010, 22).
- Describe something of the quality of understanding expected, such as accurate (DCFS 2010, 23); informed (REC 2013b, 7); systematic (REC 2013b, 7); insightful (QCA 2004, 15); and coherent (QCA 2004, 37).
- Denote particular attitudes that RE should help students to develop e.g. the understanding that there needs to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups to work together (QCA 2004, 22) and mutual respect (QCA 2004, 15; DCFS 2010, 37)
- Indicate ways in which that understanding might be evidenced through the deployment of key skills including the capacity to appraise; analyse; compare; contrast; connect; describe; explain; explore; identify; interpret; investigate; recognise; recall; reflect; retell (REC 2013b) and suggest meanings (QCA 2004, 24)



In addition to this curriculum guidance, a number of key reports have been published in the last decade with the intention of contributing to a national review of RE in England and ongoing debates in the field, such as the question of whether RE should be locally or nationally determined. Here too, the term understanding is:

- Included alongside knowledge and skills as an intended outcome in RE (e.g. REC 2013a, 6).
- Used to denote the object of study, such as: religion and belief (REC 2013a, 12; Dinham and Shaw, 2015, 4; Clarke and Woodhead 2015, 23); religions and worldviews (REC and NATRE 2017, 9); ‘religion’ as a category (REC 2018, 36); the human quest for meaning (REC 2018, 73); the world (REC and NATRE 2017, 4); and students’ own lives (Dinham and Shaw 2015, 3) and worldviews (REC 2018, 5).
- Classified into categories e.g. practical (Dinham and Shaw 2015, 23); conceptual (REC 2018, 6); academic (REC 2018, 20); and religious (Clarke and Woodhead 2015, 34; REC and NATRE 2017, 50).
- Described in terms of its character, such as: genuine (Clarke and Woodhead 2015, 8); secure (REC 2018, 44); critical (REC 2018, 13); refined (REC 2018, 5) and nuanced (REC 2018, 27).

It is evident from the above that the single term ‘understanding’ is used in a wide variety of ways in RE curricular and guidance documentation in England which makes it difficult to determine precisely how ‘understanding’ is understood in RE. Moreover, whilst understanding is clearly one of the key aims of RE, what is missing

from this documentation is any attempt to identify what it might mean for a student to develop an ‘informed’, ‘systematic’, ‘coherent’, ‘genuine’, ‘critical’, ‘refined’, ‘insightful’ and ‘nuanced’ understanding of, for instance, religions and worldviews. Greater attention to causal/explanatory/interrogative understanding in the documentation may have helped to address this.

### ***Why does this matter?***

This lack of clarity matters because research suggests that the manner in which the target understanding or object of study is outlined in the formal requirements of a syllabus has a direct impact on nature and quality of the personal understanding attained by students (Entwistle 2009). This is due at least in part to the fact that the target understanding specified in the curriculum is not experienced directly by students but is filtered through an individual teacher’s understanding of the subject and expectations about attainable levels of understanding (Entwistle and Smith 2002). Imprecision in curricular documentation will mean that the target understanding communicated to students will have been shaped by layers of interpretation by the teacher(s). Ambiguity in curricular documentation is therefore problematic as it leads to teacher uncertainty which in turn impacts on student attainment. According to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) one of the most significant factors impacting upon students’ learning in RE specifically, is teachers’ uncertainty about: the aims and purposes of the subject; what they are trying to achieve; how to interpret attainment targets; and how to define students’ progress in (Ofsted 2013; 2010).

Research also suggests that as a consequence of this process of filtration, students are often expected to reach an understanding equivalent to that held by the

teacher (Entwistle and Smith, 2002). Newton and Newton (1999) refer to this phenomenon as enculturation and argue that from an early age, students pick up clues from a teacher's discourse, the questions asked and the answers accepted, what kind of understanding is expected in particular subjects and by individual teachers. Students become very adept at drawing on strategies to persuade a teacher (or examiner) that they have understood (Newton 2012). Given this relationship between a teacher's understanding of what might constitute understanding in a given subject and students' own personal understanding(s), it is 'worth asking what conception of understanding underwrites what happens in the classroom?' (Perkins, 1998, 39).

This question lies at the heart of the current study which is concerned primarily with teachers' understanding(s) of 'understanding' in RE in England. In line with a growing global interest in the professional development of pre-service RE teachers (Ubani 2016), this study focuses specifically on pre-service secondary school teachers' conceptions of understanding in RE.

The focus on *pre-service teachers* meant that participants' views were being elicited at a seminal point in their teaching career. The period of initial teacher education (ITE) has been found to be highly significant in the development and shaping of teachers' professional identity, knowledge and practice (Beauchamp and Thomas 2011; Chong 2011; Flores 2014; Flores and Day 2006; Tang 2014; Ubani 2016). During this period of 'potentially profound change' (I'Anson 2004, 46) pre-service teachers learn to position themselves with respect to a variety of potentially conflicting discourses encountered in three communities of practice, namely their: undergraduate/masters degree discipline; ITE programme; and school placements

(I'Anson 2004). At this point in their professional career therefore, pre-service teachers are ideally placed to make connections and identify distinctions and potential conflicts between the various accounts of understanding encountered in those three communities of practice.

The focus on *secondary school* meant that participants were training to be subject specialists in Religious Education and were likely to possess a degree background related to the study of religions and worldviews and consequently, offer subject specific ways of thinking about understanding in addition to more generic conceptualisations.

The focus on participants' *construals* of understandings reflects a concern with the particular ways in which these pre-service teachers, understood, construed or conceived of 'understanding'. The term 'construal' is especially appropriate in this context, given that this paper reports specifically on participants' use of conceptual metaphors. According to Kövecses (2010, 8), when thinking about metaphor "it seems safest" to assume that the terms 'understand', 'construe' and 'conceive' may be used synonymously. Throughout this paper therefore, where the term 'construal' is employed, it refers to participants' constructions of conceptual metaphors and is used as an alternative term for 'understanding' in order to differentiate between the object of understanding (namely, 'understanding') and the ways in which participants understand 'understanding'.

## **The study**

The findings presented in this paper draw on data collected as part of a collaborative study, funded by The Farmington Institute, investigating secondary school pre-service teachers' understandings of 'understanding' in Religious Education in England. The

study involved six focus group discussions (FGD) with thirty-one pre-service secondary school teachers (22 female and 9 male) enrolled on a Secondary Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Religious Education programme at two Russell Group universities in England: one in the South West and one in the Midlands. All secondary PGCE RE pre-service teachers in both institutions were invited to take part in this project. Those participating had self-selected by completing and returning a consent form following attendance at a seminar during which they had been introduced to the project.

Participants held undergraduate/post-graduate degree qualifications from a variety of academic disciplines as indicated in Table 1 below:

[insert Table 1 here]

Most of the pre-service teachers attending the South West HEI (n=11) came from a Religious Studies (45.0%) or Philosophy (27.0%) background. The majority of those attending the Midlands HEI (n=20) held qualifications in Islamic Studies (30.0%) or Theology (30.0%).

The study employed a research instrument adapted from Newton and Newton's earlier study (1999) that examined primary school students' understandings of 'understanding' in a variety of curriculum subjects. Data was gathered during the autumn term of the Secondary Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes at each Higher Education Institute (HEI). Each FGD lasted approximately one hour; was audio recorded (with permission from the participants); and transcribed.

The focus group discussion data amounted to 31,610 words, of which 26,972 (85%) were participant turns. Data was then analysed using *NVivo 11 for Mac* as a data management tool. For further information regarding the research instrument employed, the interview schedule, and analysis of the data, please see Walshe and Teece 2019.

The following themes were derived from the initial analysis of the focus group discussion transcripts:

- Whether there is one form of understanding or many
- The relationship between knowledge and understanding
- Distinctions between discursive and non-discursive forms of knowledge/understanding
- Whether understanding is context dependent and domain specific
- Insider-outsider understanding, for example, whether it is possible for an outsider to understand the beliefs of another.

Subsequent analysis of the data collected revealed that participants made extensive use of metaphor when articulating their understandings of understanding. As it is remarkably hard to say anything at all about understanding without resorting to imagery and metaphor (Cushing 2019; Deignan 2010; Mason 2003), it is perhaps not surprising that participants employed figurative language when discussing what might be meant by understanding in RE. This presented an exciting opportunity for further analysis of the data as metaphor has been shown to be a powerful tool for researchers, opening up a world of rich opportunities (Guilherme and Souza de Freitas, 2018); creating new modes of understanding (Gibbs 2008); and uncovering unknown ideological understandings that practitioners have about their profession and their practice (Cushing

2019; Fábíán 2013). By examining pre-service teachers' linguistic metaphors therefore, additional insights could be gained into their underlying conceptual constructs (Cameron 2010; Ritchie 2010) in relation to 'understanding' in RE.

This paper then examines the various ways in which these pre-service teachers use metaphors to think and talk about understanding in RE. It does so by employing conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) to analyse participants' linguistic discourse, focusing exclusively on their construals of 'understanding'. The study employed an idiographic approach to metaphor analysis (Redden 2017), inductively identifying metaphors that appeared in participants' discourse.

What is evident from the data is that when participants employ metaphors to express their ideas about 'understanding' they are using the term primarily in its verb form, that is, their focus is on the processes involved in the act of understanding rather than on the outcome. As outlined below, for these pre-service teachers, 'understanding' is primarily construed in terms of seeing, constructing and grasping.

### **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

In this section I will outline the methods employed for the identification and analysis of the metaphors used by participants and introduce the underlying theoretical framework that informed that analysis.

In line with a growing body of educational research employing metaphor analysis (see for example Saban 2010), this study draws on the key principles and

assumptions of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). At the heart of conceptual metaphor theory lies the premise that linguistic metaphors are instantiations in language of conceptual metaphors (Cameron 2010). The metaphors that we use in our everyday conversations are conceptual tools that reflect how we structure, restructure and even create reality (Kövecses 2017). For instance, the phrase ‘he *attacked* my argument’ is metaphorical in that the term ‘attack’ is not being used literally but metaphorically and reveals a fundamental conception of argument as ‘war’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Similarly, the commonly used metaphor of life as a journey not only illustrates but can actually govern the way that we think about life, for example: ‘we can set goals that we want to reach; prepare ourselves for facing obstacles along the way; prefer certain paths to others and so on’ (Kövecses 2017, 16). Metaphors are thus an integral part of the meaning making process itself and a fundamental schema by which people conceptualise the world and their own activities (Gibbs 2008).

From the Greek ‘*metaphoraiiii*’ metaphors operate through an analogical transfer of meaning (Kittay 1987), by carrying meaning from one concept to another (Leach 2000). According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors operate as a link or bridge between two conceptual domains: the source domain and the target domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This metaphorical transfer is unidirectional (Jäkel 2002), from the source domain (which is usually concrete and rooted in our experience of the world) to the target domain, which tends to be more abstract. Thus in the metaphor ‘Love is BLIND’, the source domain (BLIND) is used to express something of our experience of the target domain (LOVE).



Whilst few scholars now accept conceptual metaphor theory uncritically, it has changed the field irreversibly (Deignan 2010), and has led to metaphor being considered a potent device by researchers to investigate peoples' emotions, beliefs, attitudes and conceptualisations (Cameron and Maslen 2010; Deignan 2010; Fábíán 2013; Redden 2017). As a result, there has been a growing interest in metaphor analysis in recent decades across a diverse range of disciplines (Todd and Low 2010), such as applied linguistics, social sciences and the humanities to investigate a variety of social phenomena (Cameron and Maslen 2010). Within education, metaphor analysis has been employed predominantly to explore notions of professional knowledge (e.g. Martin 2009); professional identity (e.g. Erickson and Pinnegar 2017); professional practice (e.g. Hamilton 2016); curriculum (e.g. Izalan and Gögebakan Yildiz 2018); and learning (e.g. Saban 2010). Its popularity lies at least in part, in its potential to uncover hidden or ambiguous meanings and taken for granted assumptions (Redden 2017) and to shed light on covert motifs influencing the world of education Fábíán (2013). Paying close attention to the metaphors employed by these pre-service teachers, can thus reveal insights into the ways in which they conceptualise understanding in this particular discipline which will have significant implications for their professional knowledge and practice (Rodgers 2016).

### ***Metaphor Identification and Analysis***

Data were analysed in accordance with the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) as outlined in Figure 1 below (see also Steen 2007, 12; Cameron and Maslen 2010, 104-110). This process enabled the identification of metaphorical instances in the data by comparing and contrasting a word's basic

meaning with its contextual meaning. As this study was concerned with participants' understandings of 'understanding', metaphorical language relating solely to the target domain UNDERSTANDING was identified (Schmitt 2005)

[insert Figure 1 here)

The following example in Table 2 illustrates the process involved in the identification and extraction of a conceptual metaphor from participants' discourse.

*'You have to grasp how basic concepts are seen by adherents to that religion.'*

(extract from FGD3)

[insert Table 2 here]

This study adopts the premise that the linguistic expressions usually considered metaphors are manifestations of underlying conceptual metaphors (Ritchie 2010; Schmitt 2005; Steen 2007). To this end, having extracted individual metaphorical idioms such as '*Understanding is when you see something for the first time*', these were then clustered together to form more substantial metaphorical concepts (e.g. 'understanding is SEEING') (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Schmitt 2005). Having identified these fundamental concepts, the data were further analysed using the text search query function in *NVivo 11 for Mac* to ensure that all metaphors relating to these concepts had been detected. For each conceptual metaphor (e.g. SEEING), common synonyms (such as 'look', 'perceive' and 'view') were included.

Implementation of the MIP resulted in the identification of 153 metaphorical instances relating to ‘understanding’ and the extraction of 3 fundamental metaphorical concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Schmitt 2005), as illustrated in Table 3. The most widely used source domain mapped onto the target domain UNDERSTANDING was ‘understanding is SEEING’, which accounted for 60.1% of references. Understanding is CONSTRUCTING’ also emerged as a substantial metaphor in this data, accounting for 27.5% of references. Finally, ‘Understanding is GRASPING’ accounted for 12.4% of references.

[insert table 3 here]

### **Participants use of metaphors for understanding in RE**

In this section I will present each of the foundational metaphors employed by participants in turn and explore their out-workings.

#### ***Understanding is SEEING***

Given that visual representation is the simplest model for understanding (Mason 2003), and one of the most pervasive (Cameron 2010) across many European languages and cultures (Geary 2011), it is not surprising that the conceptual metaphor ‘understanding is SEEING’ is dominant in these data. ‘Understanding is SEEING’ is also numbered amongst Lakoff and Johnson’s twenty three primary conceptual metaphors, which are fundamental to our conceptual schema, shared across many cultures, and within which all other metaphors are contained (1980, 50-54).

At times (see Table 4 below), participants employ the ‘understanding is SEEING’ metaphor deliberately, as in the case of: ‘understanding is when you see something for the first time’ (FGD 1). Here there is a conscious transfer of aspects from one domain (sight) to the other (understanding). In this way understanding, as in seeing something for the first time, constitutes a change in one’s awareness; a fresh perspective; a new insight. More often than not however, metaphorical instances in these data are implicit in phrases such as ‘I can see how’ and ‘I can see why’. On these occasions, ‘see’ is used as a synonym for ‘understand’.

As with our capacity to see, understanding can be blinkered, impaired and compromised: ‘personal faith can bias and cloud understanding’ (FGD 6 ); ‘you miss the divine if you just see it from a sociological point of view’ (FGD 2). Or it can be sharp and lucid: ‘a clear understanding is a really good understanding’ (FGD 4 ). Understanding may not be an all or nothing affair (Newton 2012; Nickerson 1985), it can be partial and one-sided, contingent on the lens through which one is looking. To ‘see the story of the miracle through Christian coloured spectacles’ (FGD 4), for instance, is to understand the Gospel narrative from a particular perspective.

[insert table 4 here]

Not only is understanding here being presented as a matter of observing from a particular standpoint, it is recognising that there exists ‘a myriad of perspectives’ (FGD 1), each of which will reveal ‘different sides’ (FGD 6) to that which is being studied. For some, the metaphor of ‘SEEING’ is not quite sufficient: one must not only see, one must ‘look beyond’ (FGD 4). This act of looking beyond is a deliberate turning of

one's eyes. To equate 'understanding' with 'looking' therefore, for these participants, is to emphasise the intentionality and dynamic nature of the hermeneutic process.

### *Understanding is CONSTRUCTING*

The second conceptual metaphor employed by these pre-service teachers is also commonplace in the literature and is closely related to the first in that understanding requires 'seeing the way things fit together' (Mason 2003; Riggs 2003 cited in Baumberger 2017, 12). Again, this construal is consistent with one of the primary metaphorical concepts identified by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

For these participants, as illustrated in Table 5 below, the process of understanding entails seeing connections between and fitting together discrete pieces of knowledge to form a 'whole big picture'. For them, to understand is to form a mental model (Mason 2003).

[insert table 5 here]

For these participants, to perceive of understanding in terms of 'constructing' is to focus on the whole and its constituent elements and the means by which they are brought together. It reflects a constructivist or social constructivist view of understanding which holds that learning is a dynamic process in which the learner (individually or with others) actively constructs their own understanding(s).

### ***Understanding is GRASPING***

As with the metaphors previously discussed above, the final conceptual metaphor employed by participants is consistent with one of the primary metaphorical concepts identified by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 54), namely, ‘understanding is GRASPING’. This idea that understanding is grasping features widely in discussions of understanding (Ross, 2018) so much so that grasping is often used as another word for understanding (Baumberger et al 2017). Whilst little has been said about what grasping *is*, there seems to be considerable agreement that grasping is key to understanding (Bourget 2015). Moreover, the idea that ‘understanding is GRASPING’ draws on another popular metaphor for understanding: ‘understanding is COMPREHENDING’<sup>iv</sup> (to mentally grasp), suggesting that understanding is a conscious mental activity requiring the grasping of explanatory and other coherence making relationships (Bourget 2015).

As with all metaphors, the notion of understanding as grasping has an experiential basis and is grounded in our everyday experience of the world and how we function in it (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). There is something ‘distinctively *like* to grasp an explanation: a kind of ‘*Aha!*’ experience, often referred to as a ‘feeling’ or ‘sense’ of understanding’ (Baumberger et al 2197, 16). To talk about understanding in terms of ‘grasping’, expresses something of the frustration experienced when understanding seems to evade us and slip through our fingers, as illustrated by participants’ references outlined in Table 6 below.

[insert table 6 here]

The view of understanding apparent in this metaphor is that understanding is an intellectually demanding epistemic state (Huxster 2018; Janvid 2018); a conscious and deliberate endeavour that goes beyond knowing (Strevens 2013) and involves making connections between pieces of information and inferring correct descriptions. To understand something is to know what it is and to make reasonable sense of it (Baker cited in Grimm 2011). For some (see for example Grimm 2011), grasping an explanation not only involves the ability to make connections, but the capacity to understand what the situation could be like if things had been different. It also says something about the object being grasped in that it is graspable. Bourget (2015) notes how the harder something is to visualise, the harder it is to grasp. Thus the metaphors of ‘seeing’, ‘grasping’ and ‘constructing’ are closely related.

### ***Participants’ construals of understanding in RE***

Analysis of the metaphors employed by participants reveals that these pre-service teachers hold a variety of understandings of understanding. By paying attention to the metaphors they use, we can reveal their assumptions about what it means to understand in RE which, as demonstrated above, are coherent with popular explanations of understanding as outlined previously. To conceive of understanding as CONSTRUCTING is to suggest that understanding involves some sort of analytical process (Ziff 1972); that it entails the capacity to make connections and construct relationships (Newton 2012); to process and analyse data in the manner of a mental computer (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). To conceive of understanding as SEEING coheres with the proposition that understanding means to possess a mental model or image of that which is to be understood (Chart 2000; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). Finally, to conceive of understanding as GRASPING conveys the idea that in order to

possess understanding, it is necessary to stand in a particular cognitive relationship - that of grasping – towards the object of understanding (Ross 2018).

Moreover, analysis of the metaphorical concepts in these data reveals that participants' construals of understanding correspond to several educational models of understanding, as outlined in Table 7 below, which have influenced educational philosophy, policy and practice.

[insert table 7 here]

It is also worth noting that the metaphors employed by these pre-service teachers are consistent with other influential metaphors for understanding such as Jäkel's '*mental activity is manipulation*' (Jäkel 1995, 197).

What is also clear from these data is that the language employed by these participants to express ideas about understanding describes experiences analogous to physical encounters with the object of study. For these participants, understanding involves '*seeing*' and '*engaging with the world around you*' (FG1); '*getting inside*' a particular religion; '*delving into its religious concepts or traditions of beliefs*' (FG3); '*capturing its religiousness*' (FG4); '*grappling with difficult concepts*' (FG2); '*taking off your own hat*' (FG6); '*seeing it through [e.g.] Hindu coloured spectacles*' (FG4); '*putting yourself in their shoes*' (FG5); and '*building up a bigger picture*' (FG1). As noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), how we think metaphorically matters. The metaphors employed by these pre-service teachers focus on the dynamic and developmental nature of processes involved in understanding rather than on the



outcomes. This is particularly interesting when we consider that the language of educational outcomes dominates much curricular documentation and educational discourse.

### *‘Understanding’ as positionality*

A recurring theme in these data is the notion that we come to an understanding of something from our point of view, as illustrated by the indicative extracts from FGD 6 below.

*‘You can really only ever understand from your own perspective’*

*‘You can only see the world from your perspective’*

*‘Understanding is engaging from your perspective with the world around you’*

*‘You can’t understand the world through anything but your perspective’*

There is a strong sense here that own’s own positionality plays a pivotal role in understanding the object of study, that is, that understanding relates to one’s position in relation to the object of understanding. To understand someone else’s beliefs is to be able to consider them in relation to one’s own position or point of view; to be able to see for instance:

*‘How they might differ from your own’ (FG1)*

*‘How they stand in relation to how you see the world’ (FG2)*

*‘How they relate to your own life’ (FG3)*

Moreover, to understand someone else’s beliefs requires a kind of imaginative positionality that goes beyond a simple compare and contrast exercise, for instance:

*‘When you learn about Hinduism you should try and see the world through Hindu coloured spectacles’ (FG4)*

*‘You should try to get inside the religion and see the world from inside that religion’ (FG4)*

*‘You should step into the shoes of a Hindu, a Sikh etc.’ (FG5)*

*‘Try to imagine how a Sikh feels about a certain object’ (FG5)*

For these pre-service teachers, to understand in RE is to take account of one’s own position, one’s own starting point and perspective and ‘step into’ the beliefs (and practices, and values etc.) of an other.

***To what extent are these construals of understanding RE specific?***

According to Newton (2012), understanding is context dependent, in other words, what might be meant by understanding will vary depending on the particular curriculum subject under consideration. For Newton (2012), understanding in History is particular to that discipline; as is understanding in Science, understanding in Mathematics, understanding in Art and so forth. Similarly, Entwistle (2009) argues that each academic discipline has its own domain specific ways of thinking and practicing (WTP). In Biological Sciences for instance, the central ways of thinking and practicing involve being able to appreciate how evidence is collected and interpreted, whereas in Economics, the central ways of thinking and practicing require understanding how abstract concepts are used to model real-world economic systems whilst realising the ultimate inadequacy of the match between theory and actuality (Entwistle, 2009, 61).

If understanding is domain specific, then it follows that what might be meant by understanding in Religious Education is particular to this curriculum subject. The difficulty of applying this principle to RE however, is that the question remains as to

whether Religious Education is a subject, a discipline or a field of knowledge (Baumfield 2005). Freathy et al (2017) argue that the aims, contents and methods of RE should be explicitly aligned to, and defined by, pertinent disciplines in higher education concerned with the study of religions and worldviews (e.g. Theology and Religious Studies). To these examples we may add Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology etc., each of which approach the study of religions and worldviews in specific ways and each of which therefore, may be said to possess their own domain distinctive ways of thinking and practicing. The domain specificity of understanding was one of the issues explored by these participants. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, there was a general consensus that understanding in RE was significantly different to understanding in Science but shared similar characteristics with the Arts and Humanities (see also Ubani 2016).

[insert figure 2 here]

Whilst participants' construals of understanding in terms of seeing, constructing and grasping do not differ from generic ways of talking about understanding, the ways in which they employ these conceptual metaphors reveal subject specific ways of thinking and practicing; in particular, the idea that understanding involves one's own positionality in relation to the object of study. For these participants, the development of students' empathetic understanding distinguishes RE from [some] other curriculum subjects, and from Science in particular.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began by highlighting the fact that despite its centrality to most, if not all educational endeavours, what is meant by understanding is highly contested. Using Religious Education in secondary schools in England as a case subject, it set out to examine what might be meant by ‘understanding’ in a particular educational context. It did so by employing conceptual metaphor theory to analyse secondary school pre-service teachers’ construals of understanding in RE and found that the metaphors employed by these pre-service teachers (‘understanding is SEEING’; ‘understanding is CONSTRUCTING’; ‘understanding is GRASPING’), focus on the dynamic and developmental nature of processes involved in understanding rather than on the outcomes. For these participants then, understanding in RE is primarily construed as a hermeneutic exercise and an intellectually demanding epistemic state. Whilst participants’ construals of understanding as seeing, constructing and grasping are consistent with generic conceptualisations of understanding, the ways in which they employ these conceptual metaphors reveal subject specific ways of thinking and practicing, in particular, the idea that understanding in RE involves one’s own positionality in relation to the object of study. For these participants, it is RE’s focus on the relationship between self and object of study and on the development of students’ empathetic understanding that distinguishes it from [some] other curriculum subjects in secondary schools in England, and from Science in particular.

Low (2008) notes that careful analysis of metaphors can play an important role in establishing educational problems and indicate fruitful directions for change. By presenting an analysis of three conceptual metaphors employed by participating pre-

service teachers of RE, this paper has highlighted a number of key educational problems.

First, a central issue reported in this paper is the clumsy use of ‘understanding’ in much of the RE curriculum documentation, an emphasis on objectual (understanding of) and propositional understanding (understanding that), and limited reference to causal/explanatory/interrogative understanding (understanding why) and performative understanding (ability to act). A recommendation arising from this study is that those involved in initial teacher education are ideally placed to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to examine what forms of understanding are prioritised in the RE curriculum in their placement schools and how those are evident in both the teaching and learning activities in the classroom and the ways in which students’ learning is assessed.

Second, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) remind us that metaphors possess an important function beyond their ability to conceive of one concept in terms of another, they also provide us with a means of acting towards the target concept. In other words, ‘we act according to the way we conceive of things’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5). The metaphorical constructs employed by these participants (seeing, grasping and constructing), each suggest their own way(s) of acting towards understanding. For instance, if teachers were to pay more attention to how students ‘see’, ‘construct’ and ‘grasp’ complex religious concepts, beliefs, and practices in RE, lessons might be designed specifically to enable students to build complex conceptual maps of religions and worldviews rather than to present discrete and often seemingly disconnected elements such as the 5 pillars of Islam and the 5 Ks of Sikhism (Ofsted 2010, 2013).

Third, if understanding in RE has to do with one's positionality in relation to the object of study, assessment of learning might be less preoccupied with the extent to which a student has accrued factual knowledge and more with how a student positions his or herself in relation to the object of study; how engagement with that object of study impacts on their understanding of both their own perspective(s) and those of others, and the quality of evidence used to justify and explain their position.

However, whilst using metaphor for clarification can create imaginative discussion, Rodgers (2016) warns that it might also unintentionally limit, constrain or confuse us as metaphors keep human imagination within the confines of our former experiences and conceptions (Guileherme and Souza de Freitas 2018). To talk about understanding in terms of seeing, constructing and grasping might help us to reflect on some aspects of what it means to understand in RE, but it might also prevent us from considering other facets. As noted by Grimm (2011), the act of grasping or seeing cannot be all there is to understanding. Moreover, it is important to remember that all metaphors are incomplete representations of something else (Fábián 2013; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Their explanatory power is partial (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors both highlight and hide (Deignan 2010). In the case of the metaphors for understanding presented here, we might ask, what aspects they illuminate and leave in the dark.

As this paper has demonstrated, metaphor analysis can provide a powerful tool to uncover deeply held ideological understandings that practitioners have about their profession and practice (Cushing 2019; Fábián 2013). Indeed Redden argues that

metaphor analysis offers important opportunities for further enquiry, in particular: comparing the metaphors of people from different disciplines; demonstrating how metaphors are interpreted differently by various participants; and understanding the conditions under which metaphor usage changes in particular contexts (Redden 2017, 7). Given that Religious Education in England attracts graduates from a wide range of academic disciplines such as Theology, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Anthropology, further research in this area could generate valuable insights. RE provides a unique opportunity amongst curriculum subjects to examine the extent to which teachers' personal epistemologies and construals of understanding may be discipline specific and shaped by their experiences in school(s).

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## Tables and Figures

***Table 1. Academic backgrounds of participants***

Academic Discipline	Number of participants	Percentage of sample
Theology	7	22.0%
Philosophy	7	22.0%
Religious Studies	6	20.0%
Islamic Studies	6	20.0%
Sociology	5	16.0%

***Table 2. Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP): Understanding is GRASPING***

Lexical unit	Grasp
Contextual meaning	Understand how a concept is perceived within a faith community
Basic meaning	To seize and hold firmly with one's hands
Metaphoricity	The contextual meaning of 'grasp' is sufficiently distinct from its basic meaning as it is not possible to seize and hold on to an abstract concept with one's hands.  Metaphoricity of 'grasp' is established.
Metaphor extracted	Understanding is GRASPING

**Table 3. Metaphorical Concepts identified in the data**

	SOURCES (n=6)	REFERENCES (n=153)
Understanding is seeing	6	92
Understanding is constructing	6	42
Understanding is grasping	6	19

**Table 4. Understanding is seeing: Illustrative extracts from FGDs**

<p>'Understanding is seeing'</p>	<p>'Understanding is when you <u>see</u> something for the first time'</p> <p>'A <u>clear</u> understanding is a really good understanding'</p> <p>'Personal faith can bias and <u>cloud</u> understanding'</p> <p>'You can <u>see</u> the story [of the miracle] through Christian coloured spectacles'</p> <p>'If you are from that religious perspective you've got so much more of an <u>insight</u>'</p> <p>'Need to take off one's own hat in order to <u>look</u> at things and explore ideas and perspectives that may be different to one's own'</p> <p>'I have no bias towards a Buddhist faith and therefore I can <u>see</u> it for what it is and appreciate it much easier'</p> <p>'You can really only ever understand from your own <u>perspective</u>'</p> <p>'Yeah I can <u>see</u> how music and incense and ritual and things...'</p> <p>'I can <u>see</u> why they do that, that makes sense. They treat it like a person, it's like a King, it's like respected'</p> <p>'To understand the religious ideas you have to understand it from the insider's <u>point of view</u> cos that's where it only makes it worthwhile and valuable'</p> <p>'You miss the divine if you just <u>see</u> it from a sociological <u>point of view</u>'</p> <p>'All of them <u>look beyond</u> what ordinary see, you're looking for meaning in words or images or explanations, causes. And that sort of skill that develops, that enquiring mind, curious mind'</p> <p>'Understanding that there's a <u>myriad of perspectives</u> is very different to understanding other people'</p> <p>'You can really understand what you're <u>looking at</u> and all the different sides to it'</p>
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**Table 5. Understanding is constructing: Illustrative extracts from FGDs**

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‘Understanding is constructing’	‘ <u>Building</u> understanding of the whole religion by understanding different aspects’ ‘Being able to <u>fit</u> all the pieces together like a jigsaw’ ‘Making <u>links</u> between aspects of a religion to the ‘whole’ religion’ ‘Could it just be that understanding is just something, like we can look at statements and understand how they <u>fit together</u> ? Is that just that?’ ‘It’s not just learning the story on its own but understanding how it <u>fits in with</u> what they’ve been doing so far’ ‘But it’s a <u>whole big picture</u> isn’t it? it’s not just Jesus did miracles, he did other things as well. That’s why Christians see him as so like... do you know what I mean?’ ‘It’s <u>part of a bigger picture</u> that Jesus was the Son of God’ ‘Understanding about how a concept or a thing <u>fits</u> within the religion as a <u>whole</u> ’ ‘Um and I think that understanding is a form of knowledge basically, which is a kind of shared social <u>construction</u> of reality’
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**Table 6. Understanding is grasping: Illustrative extracts from FGDs**

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‘Understanding is GRASPING’	‘You can understand something incorrectly if you haven’t <u>grasped</u> the basic concept’ ‘To <u>capture</u> something is to understand it fully’ ‘Get to <u>grips</u> with....’ ‘Understanding is <u>slippery</u> - it’s like the blind men and the elephant’ ‘Maybe that’s what understanding is, an attempt to <u>grapple</u> with difficult concepts’ ‘You have to <u>grasp</u> how it’s seen by adherents to that religion’ ‘Religious understanding is a personal <u>holding of</u> that religious belief’
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*Table 7: Educational Models of Understanding*

<b>MODEL</b>	<b>NATURE OF UNDERSTANDING</b>	<b>METAPHOR EMPLOYED BY PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>NUMBER OF REFERENCES</b>	<b>% OF COVERAGE</b>
<b>Hermeneutic</b>	Understanding is conceived as seeing and participation in a process of interpretation and meaning-making	Understanding is SEEING	92	60.1%
<b>Constructivist</b>	Understanding is understood as a process of reviewing and organising segments of knowledge to assemble a whole picture	Understanding is CONSTRUCTING	42	27.5%
<b>Cognitive</b>	Understanding is akin to grasping and holding onto abstract concepts and ideas	Understanding is GRASPING	19	12.4%



***Figure 1. Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP)***

1. Transcripts of the focus group discussions were read in full to establish a general understanding of the meaning.
2. For each lexical unit that related to participants' considerations of what might be meant by 'understanding', decisions were made concerning:
  - a) Its contextual meaning (establish its meaning in the context of this discourse)
  - b) Its basic meaning (determine whether it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts)
  - c) Whether its contextual meaning is sufficiently distinct from its basic meaning
  - d) Whether its contextual meaning can be related to its more basic meaning by some form of similarity. If so, the lexical unit was marked as metaphorical.

## **Figure 2. Domain specific notions of understanding in RE**

*‘Understanding in RE is fundamentally different from understanding in History. While they might share components, understanding in RE is more personal’ (FG1).*

*‘I don’t think RE and Science have the same skill set at all. Science is like complex knowledge whereas I think RE, like Art, is human emotion.’ (FG2)*

*‘Religion is so personal. Science is quite objective. Religion is so subjective and so personal’ (FG2)*

*‘The understandings you get through Art, History, and English you can link to understandings of RE.’ (FG3)*

*‘You could ask a question in a Science lesson and every child in that classroom will give the same answer. If you asked a question in a History lesson or an RE lesson about how you interpret this or what does this belief mean to someone you would get 30 different answers’ (FG3)*

*‘Other subjects tell us what and how, RE tells us why and it’s distinguishing between those two that makes RE distinctive’ (FG4)*

*‘Understanding in RE is very similar to understanding in Art because Art is based on interpretation’ (FG5)*

*‘RE is very empathetic compared to the rest. This distinguishes it from the other subjects’ (FG5)*

*‘The different subjects are based on different forms of knowledge’ (FG6)*

## Notes

i Unlike other subjects, the Religious Education curriculum for schools in England is not determined by a statutory national curriculum, although recently Clarke and Woodhead (2015) and the Religious Education Council (REC 2018) have recommended otherwise. Whilst RE remains a compulsory subject in schools in England, its curriculum is determined locally with Local Authorities (LAs) producing RE syllabuses for use in state funded schools in their area through an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) established by their local Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). There are currently over 150 SACREs in England (<http://www.nasacre.org.uk/database>). It is recommended, although not a legal requirement, for ASCs to consult relevant non-statutory guidelines such as the Model Syllabuses (SCAA, 1994); which were followed by the National Framework for RE (QCA, 2004) and accompanying Schemes of Work for RE (QCA, 2007); by the National Curriculum Framework for RE (REC 2013); and the final report from the Commission on RE (REC 2018).

ii The review that follows pertains to the curriculum subject ‘Religious Education’ which is part of the basic curriculum in England (<https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/other-compulsory-subjects>). Local councils are responsible for determine this curriculum but faith schools and academies are free to establish their own curriculum. Documentation relating to national public examination specifications for GCSE and A Level ‘Religious Studies’ have not been included in this review as these specifications are commercially produced by independent examination boards.

iii Meaning ‘to transfer’ (from ‘meta’ = over, across; and ‘pherein’ = carry, bear).

iv Middle English: from Old French ‘comprehender’, or Latin ‘comprehendere’ (com = ‘together’ + prehendere = ‘grasp’).

## Notes on contributor

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