

Title of Article: 'Everything is in parables': An exploration of students' difficulties in understanding Christian beliefs concerning Jesus

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Abstract:

This article reports the findings of interviews conducted with students (aged 11-13) in four English secondary schools, examining reasons why young people find it difficult to understand Christian beliefs regarding Jesus' miracles, resurrection and status as the Son of God. For the students in this sample, understanding and belief are closely related concepts. Many of them assume that belief is a necessary condition for understanding. The paper argues that greater attention should be paid in Religious Education (RE) to the relationship between belief and understanding and to the ways in which young people experience and conceptualise their learning in RE.

**‘Everything is in parables’: An exploration of students’
difficulties in understanding Christian beliefs concerning Jesus**

“To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand.” (Mark 4:11-12)

1. Introduction

According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2004), Religious Education (RE) as a curriculum subject in England and Wales is concerned with *learning about* (Attainment Target 1) and *learning from* (Attainment Target 2) religious and non-religious responses to questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, and what it means to be human. However, longstanding controversy over the nature and purpose of RE has meant that the subject has “always had something of an identity crisis” (Kepnes 1986, 504) and continues today to “search for its soul” (Wright 1993, 5).

This exploration occurs within a wider and changing educational landscape, for instance, contemporary theoretical perspectives which frame learning as a socially-constructed (Kouzlin 2003) or cultural (James and Biesta 2007) activity raise important questions for RE. If learning requires “active participation in the learning practices of a community” (Van der Zee et al. 2006, 275), what is being required of students in RE? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the focal ‘community’, for instance, whether it is educational (e.g. the school), academic (e.g. Theologians or Religious Studies scholars), political (e.g. the local or national citizenry) and/or religious (e.g. the Church or other religious associations). It also depends on what is envisaged by ‘active participation’ in ‘learning practices’ in RE. For

some, this is associated with the acceptance or adoption of, rather than engagement with, the beliefs and practices of religious communities (Van der Zee et al. 2006, 274). Such conceptions are important because they may impact upon (i) students' motivation to engage with beliefs and practices in RE and to relate them to their own; and (ii) the methods by which teachers assess learning in RE, for example, by examining changes in belief and practice rather than in understanding (Chinn and Samarapungavan 2001).

Given the primacy of the learner in the construction of knowledge in socio-cultural theories of learning (Wittrock 1987), any attempt to make sense of the learning process must take account of the way(s) in which that process is conceptualised by the learner. In other words, in order to talk meaningfully about how children learn in RE, we need to pay sufficient attention to how children themselves experience and comprehend that learning process. Consequently, this paper explores the views held by a sample of young adolescents concerning what is meant by 'understanding' in the context of RE and examines the extent to which those perceptions influence their engagement with, and understanding of, key Christian beliefs regarding Jesus.

2. Background to the study

The present study emerged from previous investigations into teaching about Jesus in RE in English schools (Aylward 2006; Walshe 2005; Walshe & Copley 2001). These studies concluded that, whilst children may be said to possess adequate knowledge about Jesus, they claim to experience similar difficulties in understanding Christian beliefs regarding Jesus' divinity, miracles and resurrection as those identified by English, French and American researchers over thirty-five years ago. These much earlier studies maintained that, in general,

children hold an image of Jesus that is more human than divine (Claerhout and Declercq 1970). This is largely due to scepticism towards the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Christian New Testament (Madge 1971). This scepticism increases with age (Savin-Williams 1977) and is more prevalent in boys (Cox 1967). It stems primarily from a distrust of the reliability of source material available (ibid) and leads many young people to conclude that, even if Jesus did exist as an historical figure, he did not perform the miracles attributed to him in the Gospels and therefore, whilst he may be described as a good, wise and great teacher, he is or was not the Son of God (Claerhout and Declercq 1970). Such ideas have been supported by recent research in England which found that, whilst there was a general assent amongst Year 6 (aged 10-11) primary school children towards an ethical and humanistic conception of the historical Jesus, there was less of a consensus of opinion regarding Jesus' divinity, miracles and continued presence in people's lives today (Allen et al. 2006).

In response to such findings, researchers have argued for the development of new teaching methods which attempt to overcome children's difficulties and lack of understanding. For instance, Madge (1971) and Claerhout and Declercq (1970) called upon teachers to present a more human Jesus. This moves the emphasis away from the theological and Christological curricular components which pupils find complex and/or contentious. However, Walshe and Copley (2001) argued against this approach on the basis that it does not faithfully represent the Jesus of Christianity or other religious traditions for whom Jesus is revered as an incarnation or representation of the divine.

By contrast, this paper argues from a cultural perspective on learning that, in order to develop effective pedagogies in relation to teaching about Jesus, in-depth exploration is needed of the

reasons students provide to explain why an understanding of theological and Christological beliefs is either difficult or impossible. Consequently, rather than focus on the way Jesus is *represented* and/or *misrepresented* through the RE curriculum, research in RE and resulting pedagogies need to emphasise the centrality of the *student response*. To this end, the present study set out to explore, using semi-structured interviews, the reasons why young people identified Christian beliefs regarding (i) Jesus as the Son of God, (ii) the miracles of Jesus and (iii) the resurrection of Jesus, as being difficult to understand (Aylward 2006; Walshe 2005).

3. Method

3.1 Sample

Interviews were conducted with a sample of 40 students from Years 7 and 8 (aged 11-13) in four secondary schools (mixed-sex) in England (see table 1). Whilst this sample does not constitute a base from which generalisations can be made about all 11-13 year old students in England, it does provide data from both male and female students drawn from a range of types of school¹ in locations with contrasting ethnic and religious composition (see Appendix 1).

Table 1: The Sample

¹ Independent schools are usually funded by fee-paying students and are not maintained by the Local Authority (LA) or central government. Church of England Voluntary Aided schools are owned by the church which provides the majority of the governing body which in turn has responsibility for RE and worship, school admissions, staff appointments and the cost of repairs and capital projects (with a large grant from central government). In State Comprehensive schools, the LA employs the staff, owns the land and buildings and has primary responsibility for deciding the arrangements for admitting students. For further information, see <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolorg/>

Secondary Schools			Participants $n = 40$	
School	Type	Location	Male	Female
A	State Comprehensive	Devon	4	6
B	State Comprehensive	Birmingham	6	4
C	Church of England Voluntary Aided	Devon	6	4
D	Independent	Devon	5	5

Permission to interview the students was granted by the Headteacher of each school.

Interviewees were selected at random from a pool of those who had previously volunteered to be interviewed in response to a call for participants from the Head of Religious Education (or equivalent) in each school. At the beginning of each interview, the students were (i) provided with information about the nature and purpose of the research; (ii) re-assured that their contributions would be treated anonymously; (iii) asked whether they would permit the interviews to be audio-taped; (iv) asked whether they had any questions; and (v) given the opportunity to withdraw. Neither teachers nor researchers put pressure on students to participate. All of the students chose to participate in recorded interviews and none had questions to ask.

3.2 Research Instrument

The interview schedule was piloted in focus group interviews with a sample of 20 students from Years 7 and 8 (aged 11-13) selected from three secondary schools (mixed-sex) in England (Devon, Dorset and Lancashire). It was revised prior to the main study and divided into three sections. Each section contained two questions. The first was designed to assess students' knowledge of a particular Christian belief, and the second, to explore their thoughts concerning why that belief might be difficult to understand.

In section 1 interviewees were presented with a picture of Jesus leaving the empty tomb and asked: a) 'What might a Christian tell you about this picture?' and b) 'Why do you think that some young people today find it difficult to understand the idea that Jesus rose from the dead?' In section 2 interviewees read the story of the paralysed man adapted from Mark 2:1-12 and were asked : a) 'What might a Christian tell you about this story? and b) 'Why do you think that some young people today find it difficult to understand the idea that Jesus performed miracles?' In section 3 interviewees were given a card on which was written 'Truly this man was the Son of God' (Matthew 27:54) and were asked: a) 'What do you think Christians mean when they say that Jesus was the Son of God?' and b) 'Why do you think that some young people today find it difficult to understand the idea that Jesus was/is the Son of God?'.

Rather than ask students to discuss the extent to which they personally found key Christian beliefs about Jesus difficult to understand, the intention was to explore why they thought young people in general might find these beliefs problematic. The aim was to provide interviewees with the safety of anonymity within which at least some might reveal their own difficulties with the beliefs in question, in addition to talking about the views of others. As data concerning participants' own religious background was not collected as part of the interview process, it was not possible when analysing the data to explore correlations between particular faith stances and categories of responses. Nevertheless, it can be noted that the state comprehensive school in Birmingham had a majority Muslim population.

Finally, the interviewees were asked if there was anything else they wanted to add concerning difficulties faced by young people when learning about Jesus, after which the

interviewer returned to some of the key issues raised by students during the course of the interview. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo computer software. For further details regarding the analysis and coding of students' responses, see Allen et al. (2006).

4. Results

4.1 Knowledge about Jesus

Student responses indicate that in general they possess strong knowledge of key Christian beliefs concerning Jesus. The majority of students ($n = 30$) identified the picture of the empty tomb as an illustration of the resurrection of Jesus and some ($n = 17$) supported their answers by alluding to elements of the crucifixion and/or resurrection narratives found in the Christian Gospels. In addition, most students ($n = 36$) recognised that for Christians the healing of the paralysed man demonstrates Jesus' ability to heal and/or forgive sins. Some ($n = 11$) explained how for Christians, the ability to heal and forgive sins demonstrates that Jesus was special; that he possessed the same powers as God making him a representative of God, or a prophet. Almost a quarter of students ($n = 9$) made the link between Jesus' ability to heal and forgive sins and Christian belief in his divine status. Finally, students' responses to what they thought Christians might mean when they talk about Jesus as the Son of God revealed a breadth of ideas ranging from a literal interpretation of the term to reference to the belief that Jesus is/was God in human form (see table 2).

Table 2: Understanding of Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God

Category of response	<i>N</i> = 40
Literal interpretation - God is/was Jesus' father	11
Jesus was sent by God as an emissary or prophet	11

Jesus was like God (e.g. could perform miracles)	7
Jesus was special	5
Jesus was God's representative on earth	3
Jesus was like a son to God	2
Jesus was equal to God/God in human form	2

4.2 Difficulties in understanding

Many of the reasons given by students to explain why some young people find it difficult to understand key Christian beliefs regarding Jesus did not relate to specific issues concerning Jesus' person, life or teaching or to precise theological or Christological problems. Instead, they related to general educational, socio-cultural, historical and philosophical issues which could affect their understanding of many other aspects of the RE curriculum. Moreover, and most significantly, when asked to identify why some young people today may find it hard to *understand* (i) the resurrection of Jesus, (ii) his miracles, and (iii) Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God, students often responded by discussing why these are difficult to *believe*. This demonstrates that for many students in this sample, 'understanding' is closely related to 'believing'. This important finding was explored in detail by the interviewer as one of the key issues raised by students during the course of their interviews.

Explanations concerning difficulties in understanding and/or believing the above Christian beliefs included: deficiencies in the way RE is taught in schools; a lack of credibility to the beliefs; the existence of conflicting knowledge or more plausible alternative beliefs; a lack of evidence; the historical distance; the unreliability of the relevant sources; the challenge of other profound theological questions; the confusion of, and conflicting beliefs between, other people; and the complexity of religious language (see table 3).

Table 3: Most popular reasons given to explain difficulties in understanding/believing

Category of response	<i>N</i> = 40	Sample quotes
Story or idea is too fantastical to be true	38	<p>“It’s not normal. It’s not real. Jesus rising from the dead is hard to believe because it’s just so unrealistic.” [School A; Student 10; Male]</p> <p>“I don’t see how one man can just put his hand on someone and he is healed. It’s just not physically possible.” [School C; Student 6; Male]</p>
Deficiencies in the way RE is taught	23	<p>“It’s boring cos I’d learnt them all before.” [School A; Student 5; Female]</p> <p>“There’s not enough time to talk about them in class. They just give you sheets and that to do instead of like having to talk like in a discussion.” [School A; Student 9; Male]</p>
Lack of belief in or questions surrounding the existence of God/Jesus	22	<p>“Some people don’t even believe in God, or Jesus. So when people say Jesus is the Son of God they find that hard to believe.” [School A; Student 3; Female]</p> <p>“If Jesus or God was like real, why didn’t God stop his own son being crucified? Why couldn’t he have performed all the miracles himself life and stopped all the pain in the world and stuff like that?” [School C; Student 1; Male]</p>
Lack of supporting evidence	19	<p>“There’s no proof that anyone ever has rose from the dead.” [School A; Student 3; Female]</p> <p>“People like hard facts.” [School B; Student 10; Male]</p>
Conflicts with other knowledge/beliefs	14	<p>“In our religion [Islam] Jesus is just a prophet. We wouldn’t say he was the Son of God. It’s difficult to understand ‘cos we have our own point of view.” [School B; Student 1; Male]</p> <p>“How can God have a son, because he’s not human. He hasn’t got a wife and it’s just, well, how can he have a son?” [School D; Student 7; Female]</p>
Conflicting beliefs of others	13	<p>“Everyone has their own views. If you go to someone they tell you something. If you go to someone else they tell you something else. It gets a bit confused.”</p> <p>“All the different religions have different beliefs and people don’t know which one to believe. You don’t know which one is right or wrong.” [School A; Student 3; Female]</p>
Happened too long ago	13	<p>“In today’s kind of world, the idea of like magic and magic things happening and people rising from the dead has been kind of filtered out. It’s not relevant.” [School A; Student 2; Female]</p> <p>“Back in the Bible there’s lots of miracles and lots of amazing things happening whereas they don’t seem to have the same things going on now.” [School D; Student 10; Female]</p>

Gospel writers had hidden agenda	11	“Maybe somebody wrote about this person Jesus just to help people have a bit more confidence in themselves and they wouldn’t be afraid of dying knowing they’re going to go to heaven.” [School A; Student 10; Male]
Seemingly miraculous events can be explained in other ways	5	“He might have been some kind of doctor.” [School B; Student 2; Male] “It’s like magicians today think they can do magical stuff, but it’s not real, it’s all illusions.” [School A; Student 10; Male]
Complexity of religious language	3	“They should tell children what different words mean, and then you’ll get them.” [School B; Student 5; Female] “Some things in the Bible are complicated. Simplify them down so they are understandable a bit more.” [School C; Student 4; Male]

Whilst there was a strong sense that understanding and belief were closely linked, when specifically asked to explore the relationship between these concepts, the responses indicated that the students in this sample conceived of that relationship in a variety of ways. For many ($n = 27$) the two were seen as distinct (see table 4). Understanding was linked to learning about external knowledge and facts; things one knows to be true. Believing was associated with hunches and feelings concerning more internal abstract notions, such as God, morality, and the soul, where the full facts cannot be known ($n = 16$). For these students, an individual might believe in something without understanding it ($n = 4$), and in particular, might understand something without believing it ($n = 24$).

Table 4: Understanding and Belief as distinct

Quotation	Student
“If you understand something, you actually know what it means and that, but if you believe it you think it’s real, so it’s a bit different.”	School A; Student 9; Male
“When you believe something you don’t need lots of proof, you just know that it’s right, whereas when you understand something someone has shown you or something’s happened to make you actually really know that it’s true.”	School D; Student 10; Female

“Understanding is like talking it through and understand that yes, he did this, he did that, but believing is like with your soul and you approve of it and feel strongly about it. Understanding is just taking it in and thinking, ‘right ok, I’ve got that’, but not really doing anything more to it.” School D; Student 7; Female

“I don’t really understand Jesus and how he works and everything but I still believe in him.” School A; Student 10; Male

“You can understand what they’re like saying that Jesus was um raised back from the dead. You can understand what they mean and what they’re saying but you don’t believe what they’re saying.” School D; Student 1; Male

However, for some students ($n = 6$) understanding and belief were complementary and even synonymous (see table 5). They maintained that neither can exist without the other; belief is not possible without understanding; and/or understanding inevitably leads to belief.

Table 5: Understanding and Belief as complementary

Quotations	Student
“If I say I understand that God’s here, around us, and if I say I believe that God’s around us, it’s both the same thing really.”	School D; Student 3; Male
“If they didn’t believe they wouldn’t understand.”	School C; Student 2; Male
“If you believe in it, you understand it.”	School C; Student 4; Male
“If you’ve got a miracle it’s hard to believe because it’s hard to understand how it could be done.”	School C; Student 6; Male

For the purposes of this paper, the following discussion will focus on students’ ideas concerning the nature of, and relationship between, belief and understanding. It is argued that this has important implications for RE.

5. Discussion

5.1. Believing and understanding

Two interpretations of the term understanding are evident in these data: (i) understanding as knowledge and (ii) understanding as belief.

5.1.1. Understanding as knowledge

Where students suggested that understanding and believing might be distinct activities, it was clear that by ‘understanding’ they were usually referring to the ability to recall knowledge.

One student for instance, who claimed that an individual could understand something without believing it, used the example of a girl in his class who “understood how heaven and everything works: if you’re good you go to heaven, if you’re bad you go to hell; but didn’t actually believe in it” [School A; Student 10; Male]. Understanding in this context, simply pointed to the girl’s capacity to recall knowledge about what Christians might believe about heaven and hell.

5.1.2. Understanding as belief

However, whilst the reasons provided by interviewees to explain why young people might have difficulty understanding Christian beliefs regarding (i) Jesus as the Son of God; (ii) the miracles of Jesus; and (iii) the resurrection of Jesus were diverse, the predominant theme underpinning many of those reasons was that young people simply do not share these Christian beliefs, rather they adhere to world-views that reject or seriously question them. The implicit view of ‘understanding’ here is that in order to understand something, an individual must be able to accept it as true or, at the very least, as plausible. Thus, in terms of the girl in the example given above, it could be argued that although she understood “how heaven and everything works” in terms of knowing particular beliefs (i.e. understanding as knowledge), she could not have understood those beliefs fully or she would have adopted them as her own (i.e. understanding as belief).

5.1.3. Belief, knowledge and understanding

This interpretation of ‘understanding as belief’ is one that echoes much philosophical enquiry into the nature of knowledge, where belief is considered to be one of the necessary, although not sufficient, conditions of knowledge (Smith and Siegel 2004). In this sense one can only know what one believes. If a person does *not believe*, for instance, that the Earth revolves around the Sun, they cannot be said to *know* that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

Likewise, for many of the students in our sample, belief is a necessary condition of understanding. To understand is dependent on believing that which is understood. For instance, if young people do not consider the idea of rising from the dead to be plausible (i.e. they do not believe it), then they cannot understand Christian beliefs relating to the resurrection of Jesus. For these students, *understanding* Christian beliefs is distinct from *understanding that* Christians hold these beliefs. On this basis, it could be argued that, in order for pupils to experience no difficulties in understanding Christian beliefs regarding (i) Jesus as the Son of God, (ii) the miracles of Jesus and (iii) the resurrection of Jesus, they must share them, as well as the other beliefs upon which they depend (e.g. theism). Potentially, this has serious implications for ‘understanding’ in the context of learning in RE, particularly when the object of understanding is belief.

5.2 ‘Understanding’ in RE discourse

In order to assess the implications of the above findings, it is necessary to survey conceptions of understanding in RE discourse.

In much curriculum documentation, ‘understanding’ appears almost as an appendage to ‘knowledge’. For instance, *Religious Education: The non-statutory national framework* (QCA 2004, 7) begins by outlining the importance of RE in terms of (i) its contribution to the ‘development of students’ knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal

religions' and (ii) its potential to 'enhance students' awareness and understanding of religions and beliefs, teachings, practices, and forms of expression'. In this sense, knowledge and understanding may be seen as inseparable, even synonymous. However, the extent to which students might be said to understand rather than merely know is often related to their ability to recognise patterns, make connections; explore possible meaning(s); apply knowledge to other situations and contexts; and appreciate why certain evidence is used as evidence.

In the academic community, understanding in RE has frequently been used to refer to the ability to (i) comprehend and grasp religious concepts (Rymarz 2007); (ii) explain how people's beliefs might impact upon their way of life (Fulljames 1996); and (iii) define meanings and appropriately employ religious and metaphorical language (Murphy 1978; Priestley 2006).

As in general discourse, where 'understanding' does not always refer to the ability to comprehend, grasp or perceive an item of *knowledge*, so RE incorporates other conceptions of 'understanding'. This is most noticeable in regard to the second attainment target, '*learning from religion*', which promotes respect, sensitivity, open-mindedness and self-esteem amongst students (QCA 2004). By exploring the religious traditions of others it is hoped that students will develop a sympathetic understanding or appreciation of those traditions that will lead to attitudes of respect and tolerance that are necessary for the promotion of community cohesion.

For some, understanding in the context of RE should transcend mere 'sympathy' and aspire to empathy. Here the intention is to provide students with opportunities to experience a religious tradition from within; that is, to enable the student to step inside the shoes of a

religious believer and experience the world through his or her eyes. In this regard, “active participation in the learning practices of a community” (Van der Zee et al. 2006, 275) could be interpreted as empathetic participation in the beliefs and practices of a religious community for the purpose of deepening understanding. This approach raises difficult questions about the extent to which such empathetic recognition is achievable and whether it maintains a genuine concern for the ‘otherness of the other’ (Miedema and Biesta 2004). Moreover, such an approach may even be said to infringe upon the integrity and intellectual freedom of the student.

Nevertheless, most would agree that one of the goals of RE is to provide for a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer in Kepnes 1986): a meeting between “the world horizon of the religious phenomenon being studied and the interpreter’s own world-view” (Kepnes 1986, 512). This sophisticated hermeneutical understanding of ‘understanding’ was not evident in the responses of our student interviewees.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Implications for RE

This study has raised a number of important issues relating to teaching and learning in RE.

6.1.1 Difficulties in understanding as evidence of learning

This paper began by establishing the need to investigate difficulties experienced by students when learning about Jesus in the classroom. However, rather than posing a problem that RE needs to address, the present study has shown that these difficulties may not represent obstacles to students’ learning, but evidence of that learning. The fact that young people

articulate concerns regarding the credibility of claims relating to the virgin birth or resurrection of Jesus, for example, or question the reliability of the available source material, is evidence of their critical engagement with those beliefs and a genuine attempt to interpret them in the light of their existing understanding of the world.

6.1.2 Distinction between believing and understanding

Consideration of whether there is a distinction between believing and understanding is important for RE. Drawing on findings from several studies investigating students' understandings and beliefs about science, Chinn and Samarapungavan (2001) show how it is not uncommon for students' beliefs about what is true (e.g. what a water molecule looks like) to be significantly different from what they have been taught in science lessons (e.g. about what a water molecule looks like). Students bring to their learning their own assumptions and beliefs about the way the world is and assess the validity of what they learn in the classroom in the light of those assumptions. This is also true of the beliefs they encounter in the RE classroom.

What is evident from this study is that religious educators need to be very clear about what they mean by the promotion of 'understanding' as an appropriate aim for RE. If students perceive that in order to understand a belief they must believe it (i.e. accept or adopt it), they are unlikely to fully engage with that belief, particularly if it does not cohere with their own beliefs. In this regard, religious educators need to think carefully about the nature of the understanding they expect of students in RE. Whilst it may be possible for a student to *know that*, according to the Christian Gospels, Jesus performed miracles and *understand that* for some Christians those miracles demonstrate Jesus' divine status, it might not be possible for

that student to *understand* these beliefs, especially if they contradict their own beliefs or world-view.

6.1.3 Critical engagement with world-views

As the present study has shown however, these world-views are often not perceived by students to be world-views. The assumptions and beliefs expressed by students participating in this study (which were generally scientific and positivist) were not understood by the students as contingent epistemological stances. Consequently, discussion of the justifications provided by young people for rejecting religious beliefs took place without any recognition that these justifications are themselves derived from particular philosophical positions. Furthermore, while religious beliefs were subject to critical scrutiny, the epistemological assumptions underpinning scientific world-views were not. Many upheld the idea, often promoted in popular culture (e.g. Dawkins 2006), that scientific knowledge, which is associated with logic, observation and evidence, is distinct from, in opposition with and superior to religious belief, which is associated with faith and superstition. There was no evidence of critical reflection on the nature of scientific knowledge or its limitations (Smith and Siegel 2004). If, as this study suggests, young people are able to articulate *what* they believe but not *why* or *how*, RE needs to develop and implement pedagogies designed to promote students' awareness of, and ability to critique, their own and others' assumptions.

6.1.4 Development of skills

The capacity to reflect on and question their own and others' assumptions is amongst those skills identified by the new National Curriculum for schools in England and Wales (QCA 2008) as essential to the development of students as both independent and creative thinkers. In addition to the 'functional skills' provided by English, Mathematics and Information and

Communication Technology, from September 2008 schools will be required to equip students with the ‘personal, learning and thinking skills’ (PLTS) intrinsic to their development as independent enquirers; creative thinkers; reflective learners; team workers; self-managers; and effective participators (QCA 2008) (see Appendix 2).

Alongside other curriculum subjects, RE is seen as having a key part to play in facilitating the development of these skills, for example, by (i) promoting *independent enquiry* through investigation of the impact of beliefs and evaluation of the influence of religion; (ii) providing students with opportunities to *think creatively* when resolving ethical problems; and (iii) encouraging students to *participate* through discussion, debate, group work and engagement with a diverse community (QCA 2008).

So whilst the new non-statutory programmes of study for RE (QCA 2007) continue to specify that the study of RE should include the examination of key beliefs, concepts and practices of Christianity, at least two other principal religions and a secular world-view, the content of that study is not viewed as an end in itself, but as a vehicle through which RE might also contribute to the development of students’ personal, learning and thinking skills.

6.2 Implications for research in RE

Considering the interpretation of ‘understanding’ held by many students in this sample, it is not surprising that when asked why they thought young people might find it difficult to *understand* the idea that Jesus rose from the dead, students responded by explaining why young people might find it difficult to *believe* in the resurrection of Jesus. In order to gain deeper insights into the learning processes involved in RE, research needs to pay careful attention to the way(s) in which young people experience and conceptualise that learning

process. For instance, an examination of how students comprehend the goals of RE may facilitate a greater understanding of their motivation to learn.

Furthermore, further research is needed that addresses with due seriousness the ontological and epistemological assumptions which both shape students' construction of knowledge and their engagement with the RE curriculum. Consequently, there needs to be a shift in emphasis away from research on content (Hayward 2006; Rymarz 2007) or the extent to which the representation of religious traditions may be considered truly authentic (Everington 1996; Greaves 1998) or representative (Jackson 2004; Nesbitt, 2004) towards an emphasis on the *student response* and *children's thinking* and *critical self-awareness* (Van der Zee 2006). In other words, in line with contemporary theories of learning, research in RE needs to prioritise the primacy of the learner.

Appendix 1: Census 2001 (National Statistics)

Ethnic Group	Devon Population <i>n</i> = 704,493	Birmingham Population <i>n</i> = 977,087
White	696590	687406
Mixed	3353	27946
Asian or Asian British	1553	190688
Black or Black British	820	59832
Chinese or Other	2177	11215

Religion	Devon Population <i>n</i> = 704,493	Birmingham Population <i>n</i> = 977,087
Buddhist	1694	2977
Christian	527209	577783
Hindu	337	19358
Muslim	1496	140033
Jewish	652	2343
Sikh	175	28592
Other	2808	2501
No religion	114498	121541
Religion not stated	55624	81959

Appendix 2: PLTS Framework (QCA, 2008)

Development of students as...	Example of Key Skills
Independent enquirers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify questions• Resolve problems• Explore issues from different perspective
Creative thinkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generate ideas and explore possibilities• Make connections• Question their own and others' assumptions
Reflective learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess themselves and others• Identify achievements and targets for development• Review progress
Team workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative with others• Manage discussions• Reach agreements
Self managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seek challenges and new responsibilities• Show initiative, commitment and perseverance• Anticipate, take and manage risks
Effective participators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss issues of concern• Present persuasive arguments• Act as advocate for views/beliefs that differ from own

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