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Jesus' parables for and by ten-year-olds: applying blending theory in in-depth analyses of pupils' RE texts, RE textbook passages, and teacher's handbook passages in the context of Norwegian inclusive public religious education

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an in-depth analysis of ten texts written by ten-year-old pupils during a religious education (RE) lesson about Jesus' parables. The texts from the pupils' notebooks were analysed with passages from the RE textbook and the teacher's handbook to explore how these books influenced the pupils' texts. The main theoretical framework guiding our analysis was conceptual blending theory, which enabled us to outline how the pupils had interrelated and integrated information from different sources during their reading, understanding, and interpretation of Jesus' parable about the lost/retrieved sheep (Luke 15:4–7). We found substantial similarities between the pupils' texts, the RE textbook, and the teacher's handbook, but the pupils' texts also included information they had acquired from other sources, such as the RE lesson or their leisure activities. The emphasis on Christian academic insider perspectives in the textbook influenced the pupils' interpretations but did not necessarily restrain them. Some pupils' texts offer interpretations that are relatively independent, although they primarily represent Christian insider perspectives, both academic and personal. Additionally, they illuminate the internal diversity of Christianity. Our focus on empirical material complements previous research on narrative RE based on historical and educational philosophical approaches.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive public religious education (IPRE); parables; pupils' religious education texts; blending theory

Since 1997, religious education (RE) in Norwegian compulsory school (ages 6–16) has been a mandatory subject that includes topics on religions, world views, and ethics, making it inclusive public religious education (IPRE). The subject has been taught based on three curriculum reforms and even more RE syllabuses. In contrast to the previous RE syllabuses (RE2008 and RE2015), the RE2020 curriculum includes five core elements, one of which focuses on the ability to adopt the perspectives of others.

The RE textbook, the teacher's handbook, and the pupils' texts analysed in this article were based on the RE2008 syllabus, which contained the following competence aim: 'to enable the apprentice to give an account of central stories from the New Testament from Jesus to [Paul][1]'. The syllabus in force, RE2020, encompasses the following less concrete competence aim: 'that the pupil should be able to explore and compare texts and material manifestations as sources of knowledge about cultural heritage associated with Christianity and different religions and world views'.[2] All the RE

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syllabuses since 2005 have comprised five basic skills. In RE2008 and RE2015, the basic skill of *being able to read* involved 'experiencing and understanding written texts'. RE2020 is more concrete, as it stresses the reading, understanding, and interpretation of religious and philosophical texts. The ways in which pupils from different backgrounds relate to, understand, and interpret biblical narratives is thus important for future Norwegian IPRE. Moreover, a statement introduced in RE2015 ('About half of the teaching time will be spent on knowledge of Christianity') remains in RE2020, and the name of the subject (Christianity, religion, world views and ethics) remains the same. The position of Christianity in RE2020 (Bråten and Skeie 2020; Rasmussen 2020) and the competences mentioned under the basic skill *being able to read* warrant an investigation into how RE pupils understand and interpret Christian texts.

As IPRE is a complex school subject, studies within this field should be informed by research developments within various scholarly traditions (Jackson 1997, 140; Sigurdsson and Skovmand 2020, 358; Skeie 2017). We thus respond to Docherty's (2018) invitation to a renewed interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical scholarship and RE research and practice. Our study is mainly inspired by the way biblical scholars employ conceptual blending theory and conceptual metaphor theory. These theories were originally developed within the field of cognitive linguistics, but biblical scholars have employed them to analyse parables. We primarily utilise conceptual blending theory to explore a small number of texts on the theme of Jesus' parables written by ten-year-old pupils a few years before the implementation of RE2020. Because empirical research has repeatedly concluded that textbooks play a central role in Norwegian IPRE (Bråten 2014), this aspect is also included in our main research question: How may conceptual blending theory elucidate ten-year-old pupils' texts on one of Jesus' parables whilst acknowledging that their RE textbook has played an important role in the classroom context?

In our analysis of the material, we aim to distinguish individual differences between the texts, such as which phrases the authors and pupils have utilised and how information from different sources has been integrated in the pupils' texts. In addition, we utilise an established model in Norwegian research on RE (Eidhamar 2001; Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021) to analyse the perspectives from which the parables are presented and interpreted. By drawing on this model, our study will contribute to the current discussion about perspectives and positioning in Norwegian research on IPRE (Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021; Winje 2017). Based on Eidhamar (2001), Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) have outlined a model consisting of two axes: (1) insider-outsider and (2) personal-academic. Thus, the model offers four main perspectives relevant for RE. As IPRE includes all pupils in the process of learning a common subject, we are interested in how these perspectives appear in the teacher's handbook, the RE textbook, and the pupils' texts, for example whether it is possible to distinguish between various academic or personal insider and outsider perspectives (McCutcheon 1999; Gregg and Chryssides 2019; Eidhamar 2019; Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021; Winje 2017).

Regarding relevant research results on pupils' RE texts since 1997, there are few empirical studies that concentrate on younger pupils' work on the parables of Jesus.[3] We have delimited our study to the context of IPRE, which is primarily encountered in Northwestern European countries as a minor school subject. Such RE has featured an emphasis on religious narratives, particularly for younger pupils. However, most academic publications on narrative RE are not empirically based but tend to use historical or educational philosophical approaches, often including curricular and pedagogical normative arguments (Vegge 1992; Breidlid and Nicolaisen [2000] 2011; Lee 2007; Reed et al. 2013). A recent exception is a Finnish empirical study exploring how a group of pupils (ages 9–10) found biblical stories relevant, e.g. Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.[4] Using a list of ten aspects of relevance and stimulated recall methods, Keränen-Pantsu and Ubani (2018) found emotional, moral, and religious relevance to be the most frequent aspects found in the pupils' comments. However, the design of the study was different from ours.

The Scandinavian context has had a small tradition of research on pupils' RE texts since the 1970s when the Swedish researcher of education, Hartman, introduced multimodal methods of researching pupils' textual world-view expressions. Norwegian RE researchers studying pupils' RE texts have

mainly referred to socialisation theory on finding that children with religious family backgrounds are better able than children with more secular backgrounds to empathise with the stories from religious traditions other than their own (Lied 2004; Haakedal 2012; Jørgensen 2014).

In British IPRE, narrative RE has also been on the agenda but, recently, only as one of several approaches (Freathy and Aylward 2010; Freathy et al. 2015). Ipgrave (2013) gave an overview of empirical research on pupils' work related to the Bible and suggested employing Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory for approaches to educational work with religious texts. Her suggestions have been critically reviewed (Hartvigsen and Tørresen 2020).

The present article presents a theoretical approach to biblical interpretation in IPRE that is influenced by the cognitive turn in biblical scholarship. Conceptual blending theory is suitable for illuminating the mental processes of authors and pupils as they emerge in our empirical material. Before we account for our source material and methods, we provide an outline of this theory.

Conceptual blending theory

In recent decades, biblical scholars have analysed parables by means of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff 2006) and conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 2006). Because blending theory draws on and expands conceptual metaphor theory, we briefly introduce both approaches below.

Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff 2006) focuses on two conceptual domains: a source domain and a target domain. According to this theory, the abstract concept or experience that constitutes the target domain is understood in terms of the more concrete and familiar concept of the source domain. This theory thus focuses on cross-space mappings between two conceptual domains, but the projections go in only one direction, from the source domain to the target domain. Each domain contains all elements and structures pertaining to the domain, but the metaphor often focuses on parts of each domain. Regarding the metaphor *life is a journey*, for example, the concrete concept of a *journey* constitutes the source domain that illuminates the more abstract concept of the target domain (*life*). When elements from the life and journey domains are mapped onto each other, a person living her/his life is a traveller, life choices correspond to crossroads, and life goals correspond to destinations. This theory is especially suited for analysing entrenched metaphors.

To account for more complex aspects of metaphors and other types of conceptual integration, Fauconnier and Turner (2002) introduced blending theory. The minimal conceptual integration network of blending theory consists of no less than four mental spaces: two input spaces,[5] a generic space, and a blended space (blend). More complex conceptual integration networks could contain multiple input spaces, generic spaces, and blends. In a conceptual integration network, counterparts in the input spaces are mapped onto each other, and the generic space highlights the commonalities of the input spaces. Thus, the generic space indicates the reasons for which the input spaces were recruited to the conceptual integration network in the first place. The blend contains selective projections from all input spaces. The new constellation of elements and frames in the blend allows for emergent structures that do not exist in either of the input spaces. This new emergent structure could be the result of different processes: 1) the elements that are projected to the blend produce new constellations (composition), 2) the new constellations recruit additional structures to the blend (completion), and 3) the blend is developed further by means of mental simulations based on the elements and structures constituting the blend (elaboration). According to blending theory, projections can be made in different directions. Thus, the mental simulations in the blend may provide new insights that could be projected back to the input spaces to illuminate aspects of them. This theory is suited for analysing novel metaphors[6] and other types of conceptual integration.

Both conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual blending theory may clarify how the authors of the RE textbook and the pupils construe parables, but the scope and complexity of blending theory and the fact that it accounts for all types of conceptual integration, not merely metaphors, allow us

to explore how the pupils integrate information from several input spaces. Such information may derive from the RE textbook, the teaching, personal experiences, and previous knowledge stored in long-term memory. Even though the pupils' texts and drawings provide only glimpses of their thought processes, our sketches of conceptual integration networks, with emphases on elements constituting their input spaces, cross-space mappings, and blended spaces, will enable us to differentiate between various components of the pupils' texts and discover how the pupils inter-relate and integrate these elements to understand the parable during the lesson.

Materials and methods

The small collection of pupils' texts originates from RE lessons given in the spring of 2017 in a small inland primary school in what is known as the Southern Norwegian Bible belt. With consent from parents and pupils, the teacher lent the second author all RE books (15 in total). The teacher explained that the pupils' use of notebooks together with their RE textbook was quite normal for her RE practice and that about half of her pupils were engaged in local Christian activities. After scanning 35 notebook pages, covering the breadth of the pupils' work on parables (drawn vs. written, writing abilities, contents, and signs of experiences or perspectives), the second author anonymised the texts, primarily by giving the pupils fictive names. She immediately saw extensive similarities between the notebook texts and the relevant passages in the RE textbook.

The qualitative in-depth study of the RE texts focused on selected elements of the teacher's handbook, the RE textbook, and eight pupils' texts on 'The lost/found sheep' (Luke 15:4–7).[7] These texts were analysed by means of blending theory, inspired by the first author's previous work on Markan parables (Hartvigsen 2012). Our material also enabled us to discuss the authors'[8] and pupils' perspectives on the parable based on the model presented by Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021). To offer transparent insights into the phrases utilised in the textbooks and notebooks, all translations from Norwegian into English are literal.

A short introduction to the RE textbook series (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011a, 2011b) is appropriate here. The RE textbook includes eleven chapters, and the last, entitled 'Christianity: stories from the New Testament', details the context of the pupils' work on the parables. The chapter has three main passages: 'Jesus teaches' (including three parables), 'The sermon on the mount' (Christian ethics and a few more parables), and 'After Jesus' resurrection and ascension'. As at 2021, the RE textbook we analysed is still in use, as are other RE series published after the 2005/2006 curriculum reform.[9]

Results

How the teacher's handbook and the RE textbook introduce the parables

The teacher's handbook elucidates the choices and interpretations made in the textbook. By providing advice and guidance for the teacher, it indirectly influences the pupils' texts. As in conceptual metaphor theory, Hodne, Syse, and Sødal (2011b) regard the parables as pedagogical tools that explain something unfamiliar by comparing it to something familiar to the audience. They claim that the interpretation of the parables is complicated by the fact that comparisons are often conditioned by culture. They therefore encourage teachers to focus on the literary context of the parables and how Christians have traditionally understood each parable (academic insider perspectives). Because the authors realise that this knowledge may limit the pupils' interpretations of the parables, they also urge teachers to let the pupils present their own interpretations (personal insider or outsider perspectives), which, they suggest, may reveal new dimensions of the parables. This dual approach and receptiveness to different perspectives on the parables may function well in IPRE, but we wondered the extent to which the authors' intentions were reflected in the textbook and the pupils' notebooks.

In the textbook, the introduction to the section 'Jesus teaches' presents three parables, one of which – 'The parable of the sheep that was retrieved' – is examined below (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011a, 143). The pupils are told that Jesus was a popular preacher and teacher who often told parables to explain difficult or unfamiliar topics to his audience. They learn that 'he compared the unfamiliar with something that was familiar to the audience' (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011a, 142). They are also informed about the main themes of the parables, including that some deal with God and his relationship with human beings, some concern Jesus, and others deal with how human beings should treat one another and God. The word *parable* is also explained in a frame in the margin with examples. The textbook thus focuses on academic insider perspectives. This introduction fits well with the emphasis on academic insider perspectives presented in the teacher's handbook, and it may guide how the pupils interpret the parables.

Luke 15:4–7 in the RE textbook and the teacher's handbook

In Luke 15:4–7, Jesus presents both a parable and an interpretation, but the interpretation is not further examined in the RE textbook. In the textbook, Luke 15:4–7 is followed by the heading 'Think for yourself' and the following questions: 'Whom may the shepherd symbolise? Whom may the sheep symbolise? What does the parable reveal about Jesus' relationship to human beings?' (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011a, 143). Whereas the first two questions are open-ended and may invite the pupils to suggest their own cross-space mappings (personal insider or outsider perspectives), the third question suggests that the authors prefer the following cross-space mappings: Jesus (target input) maps onto the shepherd (source input), and human beings (target input) map onto the sheep (source input). The openness of the first two questions to the pupils' personal perspectives is thus trumped by an academic insider perspective in the authors' subsequent question and text. This point is developed in the next passage.

In the parable, Jesus suggests that one of his listeners owns a hundred sheep, but the word *shepherd* is utilised in the questions and in the subsequent paragraph in the textbook. This paragraph elaborates on the entrenched Christian mapping between Jesus and a shepherd who watches over his sheep. Hodne, Syse, and Sødal (2011a) identify this as a common theme in Christian art and substantiate this information with four pictures of such art (academic insider perspective). Whereas the third question indirectly maps the sheep onto human beings, the subsequent text indirectly maps the sheep onto early and contemporary Christians (academic insider perspectives). The focus on the Christian reception history may limit the range of the pupils' interpretations of the parable (personal insider or outsider perspectives) despite the authors' initial intentions (in the teacher's handbook) to stimulate different interpretations of the parables in the classroom. The third question may also illustrate a dilemma regarding Norwegian IPRE because it indirectly places all human beings, including the pupils, in a relationship with Jesus. By focusing on the academic insider perspective in a manner that possibly invites a similar personal insider perspective, the textbook may not merely delimit the range of possible interpretations of the parable, but it may also enhance the proclamatory function of the parable. Despite the emphasis on Christianity in Norwegian IPRE, this enhancement may not agree with the introduction to the syllabus, which states that 'teaching shall not include preaching, proselytising or religious practice' and that the teaching should be 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (RE2008).

The teacher's handbook offers some additional information about the reception history of the parable, the history of the shepherd motif, and the main point of the parables in Luke 15, i.e. God's love for all human beings. Last, but not least, it points out the literary context of these parables: the Pharisees' criticism that Jesus often associated with people who were on the outskirts of the religious and social community. This context is not mentioned in the textbook, but Hodne, Syse, and Sødal (2011b) suggest that the teacher should provide this context to the pupils during the lesson. They argue that the main point of the parable is that God's love also encompasses those who are ostracised (academic insider perspective). In different ways, the pupils' texts indicate that this information has been communicated to them.

The parable in the pupils' notebooks

We have selected ten texts that offer diverse insights into how these eight pupils typically interpret this parable. For instance, the pupils employ different headings, enhance diverse aspects of the parable, replace terminology utilised in the parable, and add information and drawings that are not present in the textbook. Some of these components are selected for further analysis below.

The materials suggest that the pupils include information from the RE textbook, but other components of the data cannot easily be traced to the textbook. These aspects may have been prompted by the teaching or by experiences the pupils have had with Christian or other contexts. Thus, the pupils do not merely copy the parable or the paragraphs in the textbook. They include new information that influences their interpretations of the parable. The pupils' texts thus indicate their interpretations of and possibly their personal insider or outsider perspectives on the parables, a point to which we will return throughout the analysis and in the discussion.

When the pupils introduce Luke 15:4–7, Laila and Lars utilise the main heading of this section in the textbook, i.e. 'Jesus teaches'. Lasse, Liv, and Laurits utilise the title of the parable as employed in the textbook, 'The sheep that was retrieved'. Lorents employs this title as a subtitle that is combined with the main title, 'Human dignity day'.[10] Lise creates a novel title: 'The sheep that went missing'. This title is also employed by Liv in connection with a drawing. Whereas the titles 'Jesus teaches' and 'Human dignity day' draw attention to the text-external contexts, i.e. the textbook and lesson, in which the parable is set, the titles 'The sheep that was retrieved' and 'The sheep that went missing' reflect an interpretation of the content of the parable. Of these titles, the latter title displays the higher level of individual interpretation of the parable, but it also reflects the final utterance of the owner of the sheep in the parable. It turns the main events in the source input upside-down by focusing on the actions of the sheep, not the actions of the owner. With the exception of the title 'Human dignity day', these titles reflect an insider perspective. This insider perspective may either constitute the pupils' personal perspectives or reflect the academic perspectives presented by the textbook or teacher.

The pupils present the parable in two main manners. The first alternative is exemplified by Laila and Lars, who offer a summary of the paragraph that introduced the parable in the textbook, with one exception. Both point out that the parables may concern God and God's kingdom (target input). 'God's kingdom' is not mentioned in the textbook but may have been presented by the teacher, or it may suggest that both pupils have encountered parables in other contexts. The other alternative is presented by five pupils. They draw attention to the context in which Jesus utters the parable. This context is not mentioned in the pupils' textbook. The pupils may know this context from leisure activities, but the verbatim similarities of the formulations may indicate that the teacher provided this information in her teaching, either orally or in writing. 'When the scribes criticised Jesus because he was together with publicans and sinners, i.e. those who were regarded as thieves and mean, Jesus told this parable'. This sentence may reflect the recommendation in the teacher's handbook that the teacher should address this point. The formulation suggests that the teacher has adapted the information about the literary context of the parable (Luke 15: 1–3) to be suitable for the pupils' young age. The pupils' presentations of the parable reflect an academic insider perspective that may or may not coincide with their personal perspectives.

Other aspects of the pupils' texts reveal some commonalities. Unlike Jesus, none of the pupils mentions the owner of the hundred sheep. Rather, five of them utilise the term *shepherd*, a term that probably was brought to mind by the questions posed by the authors of the textbook, the text that followed immediately after the parable, and the artworks that illustrated this text sequence. Laila writes that Jesus (target input) has a hundred sheep (source input). Thus, she seemingly operates in the blended space where elements from the target input (Jesus) and the source input (the sheep) are present at the same time. Laila's statement corresponds to information in the textbook that focuses on Jesus as a shepherd who takes care of his sheep.

According to Lars, Jesus says that a man (source input) has a hundred sheep (source input). When Lars initially summarises the parable, he thus focuses on the source input. At the end of his text, he interprets the parable by identifying this man (source input) as God (target input) and the retrieved sheep (source input) as a human being (target input). This insider perspective (personal or academic) is possibly influenced by the third question in the RE textbook. Lars provides an interpretation that diverges from the interpretation provided by Jesus. Whereas Jesus states that there will be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (target input), Lars argues that there will be a celebration in heaven when a person is found. In fact, in Luke 15:4–7, the parable and its interpretation have divergent frames. Thus, the biblical text itself allows its audience to explore different aspects of the blended space through simulation, depending on the frame that is projected to structure the blend, i.e. the frame of the source input (the sheep that *is found*) or the frame of the target input of Luke 15:4–7 (the sinner who *repents*). Lars may thus have created a blend where he continues to utilise the frame of the source input (which focuses on the *action of the man*/owner), even though Jesus' interpretation focuses on the *action of the human being who repents*. Lars' text thus demonstrates that the pupils' interpretations can be relatively independent. Until now, the pupils have interpreted the parable from a Christian insider perspective, either academic, based on the information presented in the textbook, or personal. Laila and Lars are more independent of the textbook than the other pupils are.

The interpretations of three pupils may reflect the context of the lesson, i.e. human dignity day, and/or the literary context of the parable. Laurits claims that 'God does not discriminate between people, when they return there is a celebration'. Lise concludes that Jesus 'did not only care for those who were kind, but that all are of equal value to God, despite how they look or how they behave'. Liv states, 'Jesus means that all are of equal value and that we should not think about being better than everybody'. An equal point is made in a drawing by Leif of two persons with different colours with the heading 'Of equal worth!' These interpretations suggest that these pupils are not simply concerned with cross-space mappings between the source and target inputs suggested in the biblical text and in the RE textbook. Additional input spaces are recruited to the conceptual integration network, and these input spaces substantially influence the interpretation of the parable. Although the interpretations do not offer precise information about the additional input spaces recruited to the conceptual integration network, the interpretations suggest that the processes taking place in the blended space and the backward projections to the target input focus on ethics. Whereas Laurits, Lise, and Liv explicitly interpret this aspect of the parable from a Christian insider perspective, either personal or academic, Leif does not mention specific Christian terms or ideas. His multimodal text could thus reflect a personal outsider perspective.

Another interesting point is that only Lasse states that the man/owner simply left the ninety-nine sheep, as in the parable. Three pupils do not mention this scene explicitly. Liv writes that the shepherd discovered that the sheep was missing at the farm, Laila that Jesus enclosed the ninety-nine sheep, Lars that the man took the ninety-nine sheep home where they were safe, and Lorents that the shepherd put them somewhere. The solutions inferred by Liv, Laila, Lars, and Lorents may reflect the information that follows the parable in the textbook, i.e. that Jesus is a shepherd who takes good care of his sheep, or similar information that the pupils have learnt during the lesson or other extracurricular activities (Christian insider perspectives, either academic or personal). Consequently, information from the blended space, i.e. Jesus is the good shepherd, is projected back to the source input to elaborate on its events. This example suggests that the pupils do not isolate the different mental spaces and make projections in only one direction. The entire conceptual integration network is at work.

Lasse's interpretation of the parable stands out: 'Jesus meant that each and every one that believes in him then they rejoice in heaven and prepare a feast, and everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life'. His interpretation suggests that a novel input space is recruited to the conceptual integration network, namely John 3:16. Lasse seemingly maps the sheep onto 'everyone who believes in him'. The rejoicing/feast in heaven when a sinner returns is mapped

onto the idea that 'everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life'. Lasse's interpretation is not inspired by the paragraphs on the parable in the RE textbook. Rather, the parable has seemingly activated Lasse's previous knowledge of John 3:16. The RE textbook, in an earlier chapter, contains a reference to John 3:16, which the pupil may remember. Alternatively, the knowledge may stem from his leisure activities. Lasse's interpretation of the parable constitutes a blend of different New Testament traditions that is novel both with regard to Jesus' own interpretation and the paragraphs in the RE textbook. However, it is in line with general Christian teaching (insider perspective). Lasse's interpretation combines information in a manner that demonstrates a certain degree of independence.

In sum, in the teacher's handbook, Hodne, Syse, and Sødal (2011b, 105–106) draw attention to the challenge of balancing traditional Christian interpretations (academic insider perspectives) with the pupils' personal interpretations (personal insider or outsider perspectives) of the parables. Our analysis of the RE textbook shows that Christian interpretations and contexts (insider perspectives) influence some of the questions posed, the sections that frame the parables, and the illustrations in the RE textbook. Regarding the perspectives from which the parable is presented in the pupils' texts, the results are fairly uniform. With the possible exception of Leif's drawing, all interpretations made by the pupils are influenced by or represent Christian insider perspectives. Throughout the analysis, it is often hard to determine whether the pupils' texts simply represent academic perspectives or whether their personal perspectives on the parable coincide with academic insider perspectives.

Our analysis of the pupils' texts demonstrates that their interpretations reflect the RE textbook, but they are also greatly inspired by information they acquire during the RE lesson and their previous experiences and knowledge stored in long-term memory. Blending theory has enabled us to analyse the mental processes involved in meaning making through conceptual integration. Despite the important role of the RE textbook in this classroom, as in other Norwegian RE classrooms, it influences the pupils' interpretations only to a certain extent.

Discussion

In the introduction, we drew attention to the current debate on perspectives and positioning in Norwegian research on IPRE (Eidhamar 2001; Winje 2017; Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021), the prominent position of Christianity (RE2015; RE2020; Bråten and Skeie 2020; Rasmussen 2020), and the fact that most research on narrative RE has primarily been conducted from theoretical and pedagogical angles (Vegge 1992; Breidlid and Nicolaisen [2000] 2011, 57–75). In our empirical study, we combined fresh insights from blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 2006) with an established model for teaching IPRE that emphasises two axes: insider-outsider and personal-academic (Eidhamar 2001, 2019; Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021).[11]

The analysis of the teacher's handbook, the RE textbook, and the pupils' texts revealed that these texts primarily represent Christian insider perspectives. The focus on academic[12] Christian insider perspectives in the RE textbook could, to some extent, explain the following characteristics of the pupils' texts: (1) the overwhelming presence of Christian insider perspectives and (2) the lack of outsider perspectives, with the possible exception of Leif's multimodal text. However, the lack of outsider perspectives in the pupils' texts could also be explained by the research of Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021). They discovered that pupils who defined themselves as insiders of a specific religion found it hard to perceive this religion from an outsider perspective. The fact that half of the class recruited for our study took part in Christian leisure activities, the school's location in the Bible belt, the academic insider perspectives of the RE textbook, and the quantitative distribution of teaching time and curriculum in favour of Christianity in IPRE could thus make it difficult for these pupils to distance themselves from Christian insider perspectives. To achieve a better balance between insider and outsider perspectives in this and similar contexts, stronger emphasis could be put on outsider perspectives and historical perspectives, inspired by biblical scholarship or by other scholarly traditions. Winje's (2017) model constitutes one example of a broader approach to religious texts.

The fact that the pupils' texts were composed during an RE lesson may explain why they primarily presented academic perspectives on the parable, which may or may not coincide with their personal perspectives. However, our analysis of the pupils' texts based on blending theory also demonstrated that different experiences and knowledge are activated when the pupils read the parable. The aspects of the pupils' interpretations that do not reflect the RE textbook may represent the pupils' personal perspectives or the influence of knowledge imparted by authoritative figures in the local context, such as the teacher, priests, Sunday school teachers, and parents. Regardless of the source, the pupils have chosen to include this information in their texts, which indicates some level of independent thinking, especially since they use this information as a basis for further reasoning, to fill in gaps in the parable, and to pinpoint the meaning of the parable. The variety of the conceptual integration networks inspired by the same parable indicates that the pupils are influenced but not necessarily curbed by what they read or hear during the RE lesson. The pupils' various interpretations illustrate that two axes, not four boxes, constitute the Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) model. The format of the axes indicates that the pupils may position themselves at different points along these axes and not necessarily at the extreme points.

In their study of disciplinary reading in RE, Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) focus on the relevance of the subject and the subject content to the pupils. However, Winje (2017) is critical of the idea that IPRE should be taught in a manner that attempts to make religion relevant to the pupils. Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) found that pupils perceived the subject and subject content as more relevant if it was presented from an insider perspective. When the results of our study are interpreted against the backdrop of the study of Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021), the quoted parable and the academic insider perspectives presented in the RE textbook could enhance the pupils' perceptions of the relevance of the subject content. Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) present a general study of disciplinary reading, but as indicated by the study of Keränen-Pantsu and Ubani (2018), pupils may detect different types of relevance when they read parables. Some of the headings, written interpretations, and drawings in the pupils' texts focus on moral themes, suggesting that these pupils (and possibly their teacher) stress the moral implications of the parable, similar to the moral relevance the Finnish pupils found in the biblical texts.

Whereas the four perspectives of Eidhamar (2001) and Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021) constituted the main categories employed in the analysis, categories from blending theory enabled us to analyse the authors' and pupils' interpretations in further detail. The detailed analysis facilitated an exploration of the existing diversity within the Christian insider perspective, i.e. how specific positions along the two axes are manifested in concrete interpretations that draw on and combine the pupils' previous knowledge, in this case, primarily from the Christian tradition. A focus on the divergent interpretations within the Christian tradition is consistent with Jackson's (2014)[13] emphasis on the internal diversity of religions. Blending theory enables us to extend the current debate on positioning in IPRE beyond the four extreme points of these perspectives by facilitating an exploration of interpretations that illustrate the existing nuances along the two axes. Because the theoretical framework is developed within the realm of cognitive linguistics, it is not limited to New Testament or biblical studies and could be employed with regard to texts from different religious traditions and to outsider perspectives as well as insider perspectives. Thus, it can elucidate the conceptual integration taking place when religious texts are read based on different types of academic and personal insider and outsider perspectives.

Notes

1. The official English text has incorrectly used 'the prophets' instead of 'Paul'.
2. The translations from RE2020 are ours, as there was no official English translation by the end of 2021.
3. Sidsel Lied's PhD dissertation (2004, 42 f, 186) pays little attention to the 44 young pupils' texts on the parables and instead focuses on texts by four main pupils.
4. In the observed class, nine pupils' texts were chosen for analysis because they included the most reflections on the parables.

5. Regarding metaphoric blends, the two input spaces correspond to the source and target inputs of conceptual metaphor theory, but since blending theory can be utilised to illuminate all types of conceptual blending, we utilise the term 'input space' here. In the analysis, the terms 'source input' and 'target input' are utilised for the sake of clarity.
6. It is important to distinguish between the linguistic expression of a metaphor and its underlying conceptual content. The traditional distinction between a metaphor (she is a shining star) and a simile (she is like a shining star) is based on surface realisation, but the same conceptual metaphor underlies both forms. Blending theory focuses on the underlying conceptual metaphor (Stockwell 2002).
7. The eight pupils produced ten texts.
8. Choosing pupils' texts on 'The lost/found sheep' means that we only refer to two pages in the RE textbook: the chapter introduction and the page covering this parable (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011a, 142–143), and the corresponding pages in the handbook (Hodne, Syse, and Sødal 2011b, 105–106).
9. In principle, Norwegian teachers may choose the teaching aids they find appropriate for the syllabus in force. The school budget is probably a main reason for delays in the purchase of new RE textbooks. Such books for ages 10–13 will be published in 2022.
10. In Norwegian: 'Menneskeverdsdagen'.
11. Winje (2017) presents an alternative model that is constituted by the following four perspectives: 1) a historical perspective, 2) a current, academic insider perspective, 3) a current, academic outsider perspective, and 4) a personal perspective. Winje argues that the first perspective is essential, whereas the personal perspective should be voluntary. The historical perspective is new in comparison to the traditional model of Eidhamar (2001) and Unstad and Fjørtoft (2021). It suggests a possible third axis – historical-current – which, in other models, is seemingly subsumed under the personal-academic axis. Overall, Winje's model focuses on different types of academic perspectives.
12. Reviewing the insider/outsider debate within the study of religion, Gregg and Chryssides (2019) do not apply the personal-academic axis but include this issue whilst discussing the role of the researcher and arguing that the insider/outsider binary is an oversimplification.
13. The internal diversity of religions is emphasised in the first core element of RE2020.

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