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Research on Children's Concepts of God and Spirituality and its Implications on
Educational Inequality in Early Childhood Educational Reform in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In his 2006-07 Policy Address, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong committed HK\$2 billion to enhancing holistic ECE through the instigation of a school voucher scheme. The new paradigm of a child-centred curriculum is considered necessary to keep pace with international quality educational developments. The paradigm of spirituality education for young children, which enshrines interconnectedness (Taggart, 2001), is in essence the holistic education that is advocated in child-centred ideology. Religious education, in contrast, is underpinned by teacher-centred ideology and has the aim of transmitting traditional religious values to the younger generation. The article reports on six case studies on three different faith schools which suggest that elements of spirituality are embedded in the newly advocated curriculum. The preliminary data collected, however, also suggest that there is a misunderstanding on the part of stakeholders in their view of the conceptualisation of Spirituality Education as nearly synonymous with Religious Education.

Based on these findings, the author hopes to arouse the public at large to the potential educational inequalities existed alongside the educational reform policy; firstly to the parents when exercising their rights under the school voucher scheme and secondly, to faith schools being distracted from their school mission by a misconception that Spirituality Education and Religious Education are nearly synonymous.

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Introduction

Following Hong Kong's return to China, the Hong Kong Government initiated an educational reform to promote the child-centred approach to meet the changing society since 1999. The old paradigm of teacher-centred curriculum is now considered out-dated and should give way to a holistic development underpinned by a child-centred ideology for Quality education. The newly advocated child-centred paradigm is said to keep pace with the global wave of changes in the world.

In order to implement what is deemed as Quality education, it is worth noting what a holistic integrated curriculum and its underpinning philosophy is about. Holistic educational theory (Miller, R. 1991b, cited in Taggart, 2001; Lau & Tsang, 2010) asserts that each human being is a complex, interrelated system of abilities and potentials and that a community is a democratic, diverse and communicative collection of human beings. Perceiving holistic education in this way, it is said that holistic education does enshrine a distinct kind of spirituality of interconnectedness (Taggart, 2001). The inclusion of Spirituality Education is therefore kept in line with what the early childhood education (ECE) reform is advocating.

The article explains the historical fact that half of the preschools in Hong Kong are Christian-faith schools. It goes on to explain how the advocated educational reform has affected the early childhood sector. What follows is the discussion of the difficulties of implementing a genuine holistic child-centered curriculum in the humanistic way. Following this discussion, the issue of educational inequality is brought forth. The issue is associated with the advent of the

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school voucher scheme, which would be granted to those preschools that adhere to the direction mentioned in the 2006 guide to preprimary curriculum. The inequality basically stems from a misunderstanding of the faith schools by thinking that the holistic spirituality education has not much difference from the tradition teaching of religious education. Next, the research is presented and the findings mentioned to clarify to the stakeholders the difference between spirituality education and religious education in terms of its pedagogical practice and the learning outcomes of young children. The article concludes with a recommendation that a clarification of the meaning of spirituality education and religious education is needed, or else the issue of educational inequality could not be satisfactory addressed.

An Overview of Christian Faith Schools in Hong Kong since the British Colonial Era

Britain, as a paternalistic colonial ruler, welcomed Christian missionaries to reside in Hong Kong for the provision of social services and evangelization (Lau, 2008) and to provide the Christian form of education though the colonial government was said to have adopted a laissez-faire approach to religious education (Wong, 2005) in this respect. The practise might perhaps correspond with the ideological ideas of accommodating the cultural values of the colonial countries.

Beginning 150 years ago, missionaries from different parts of Europe, the United States and Mainland China came to Hong Kong to work in order to evangelize. With evangelizing religion as their prime aim, they provide social services for the needy. Almost all the preschools set up before mid 1980s were by missionaries. Nursery schools, child-care centers were established to take care of the children with young mothers who go to work in factories. The

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This historical situation continues to the present day where Christian-run preschools still account for half of the total number of preschools in Hong Kong - see table 1.

By Referring to the information on HKedCity (2008), among the 958 kindergartens and nursery schools in Hong Kong, 517 of them are sponsored by religious congregations, which is 54% of the whole. The details are as follows:

Table 1.

Number and Percentage of kindergartens sponsored by different religious and non-religious congregations in 2008

	Catholic	Protestant	Taoist	Buddhist	Muslim	Other religions	No religion	Total
Number of schools	65	417	9	16	3	7	441	958
Percentage	6.78%	43.5%	0.94%	1.67%	0.31%	0.73%	46%	

Among these religious schools, the great majority are non-profit making organizations. It is these schools that are entitled to receive subsidies and are eligible to participate in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government's school voucher scheme.

The impact of the recent Educational Reform in Hong Kong

Following Hong Kong's return to China, there has been growing interaction and communication between the two societies including academic exchanges. The rapid and progressive changes happening on the Mainland of China naturally and inevitably have an impact on Hong Kong's educational thinking. A change of the government's attitude towards

Research on Children's Concepts of God and Spirituality and its Implications on education can be seen in the Consultation Document on Reform Proposals *Excel and Growth: Review of the Education System (May 2000a)*, which then followed by *Learning for Life, Learning through Life*, and the *Learning to learn: the way forward in curriculum development* (Sept. 2000b). Together with the recent published *Early Childhood Curriculum Guide 2006* which is to replace the 1996 version, these documents seek to lounge for a change from the traditional didactic teacher-centered curriculum to a progressive child-centred balanced curriculum (Lau, 2006, p.81).

Since the inclusion of spirituality dimension is considered as an inseparable part in a genuine holistic 'child-centred' curriculum in the western terminology, it follows that the concept of Holistic curriculum when strongly emphasized in this latest issue of the Curriculum Guide in Hong Kong has indeed reiterated and reconfirmed the inclusion of the 'spiritual' (spirituality, to be precise) aspect in the 'vision of the education reform' published in the report of the review (Education Commission, 2000b):

"Moral education will be acknowledged as playing a very important role in the education system, and having an important social mission. Students will experience structured learning in moral, emotional and spiritual education to help them develop a healthy outlook to life."

(Hong Kong Education Commission, Learning for Life-Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong, September 2000b, 35.)

In this situation, one can argue that the SAR government's policy in educational reform has the effect of fostering spirituality education in Hong Kong.

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This educational policy, however, is not well understood by many schools in the pre-primary sector, which have a religious faith as its school mission. For these schools, the emphasis on a holistic development of young children and the inclusion of Spirituality Education (SE) in the curriculum as an index of Quality education confuses SE with RE (Religious Education).

To the understanding of some of the faith schools in Hong Kong, therefore, to continue their usual way of traditional RE teaching by transmitting religious knowledge to young children has indeed been fostering the Spirituality Education in the newly educational policy. They have no idea that the conceptualization between Religious Education and Spirituality, could be very different. In essence, the word 'spirituality' does not necessarily mean the same as religion. Yob (1995, p.115) even goes on further by saying that 'spiritual education should not be equated with religious education' and that "spirituality is a connectedness with 'something' other than the student's material selves: God, or, if we prefer, transcendence, ultimacy, truth, or inner power".

A review of literature in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia remind us that "spirituality is an important aspect of human life, related to, but different from religion. " Many academic disciplines have argued it to be erroneous to describe spirituality as being the exclusive property of any one particular religious tradition, and that there is, in fact, a clear distinction between spirituality and institutional religion (Erricker, 2001; Priestly, 2002, Scott, 2001, Tacey, 2003, cited in Hyde, 2006, p.19).

The complexity of implementing the holistic spirituality driven child-centered curriculum

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It is said that spirituality has its own form of creativity and imagination that allows one to explore contemplative practices. Activities can be planned and carried out in an educational setting that allows an approach to spiritual issues without them being labelled spiritual (Bryza, Susan P. 2005). The notion of spirituality is an important dimension of the human quest for meaning and purpose, and in order to foster the spiritual development in young children, the ECE curriculum and its allied pedagogy must recognize the values of imagination, creativity, self-expression, unfolding, discovery learning, meaningful learning, experiential, affective education, exploration, no absolutes, self-initiative, self-actualisation, curiosity fulfilment, self-esteem, self-concept, non-repressive, self-realisation, reflection, relationships, insight cohesion, meaning, well-being, whole-language and whole person/holistic development (Watson, 2007; Bode, 1998). What these academics are suggesting is to embody all these developmental elements in young children so as to qualify the curriculum as a holistic one. In other words, the implementation of Spirituality Education would ask for an integrated curriculum with knowledge being permeated throughout the entire curriculum and should not be confined by transmitting the narrowly defined Religious Knowledge/Education as a separate subject.

Scholars like Dillion (2000) therefore says that the pairing of spirituality with religious concepts fails to recognize the true nature of spirituality. In terms of Spirituality Education (SE), what is needed is a global spirituality that is not to be confused with Religious Education (RE).

In a recent Journal paper written by Fitch et. al (2009, p.2), the authors say that, "There is often misunderstanding between the concepts of spirituality and religion and that terrifies many and they tend to shy away from both topics. "It is important to note that religion (an organized belief system) and spirituality (an inner longing for meaning and community) are not same thing.

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“Religion is based on an organized set of principles shared by a group whereas spirituality is the expression of an individual's quest for meaning.” in life's encounter.

Thus, with an understanding of the differences between the two concepts, one would realize that the concept related to religion, especially those of Christianity (including Catholicism and Protestantism), which is a revealed religion, is basically “God-centered”, is therefore contrastingly different from the ‘Man-centered’ Spirituality concept, which is to satisfy the psychological needs of man to search for meaning in life's encounter. In order to transmit the God-centered revealed religion, the curriculum content must be pre-set by the teacher while the pedagogy has to be didactic for the transmission of the gospel teaching. It follows that the Catholic doctrine should be adhered to in teaching young children and that they should not be encouraged to put their own interpretation or to create their own meanings on the understanding of the Bible, or from the Universal Church (headed by the Pope in Rome).

In this connection, I would like to argue once again that why the newly advocated ECE Educational Reform with its paradigm shift from a teacher-centered curriculum and pedagogy to a child-centered curriculum and pedagogy is essentially and ‘implicitly’ asking for a paradigm shift from the traditional Religious belief system to a child-centered Spirituality belief system.

It follows therefore in order to facilitate the teaching of Spirituality, the pedagogy employed must be open and non-didactic, so as to facilitate the creation of meaning by the students, though the meaning created could be deviated from what is traditionally established and taught by the faith schools.

Educational Inequality for ECE stakeholders

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Instead of agreeing with the argument made by Wong (2005) in that the SAR government is ambiguous when delivering the concept of Religious Education (RE) and Spiritual/Spirituality Education (SE) and its implications in the policy documents, I would echo my earlier argument that the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government is indeed clear about the distinction between the two concepts. According to my understanding, the SAR Government would logically prefer to adopt the child-centred informal "Spirituality Education" rather than the teacher-centred didactic and formal "Religious Education" after the return of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) regime. The rationale being that the RE focuses more upon the specific group (Christianity) and the organization, while spirituality is more generic, and may even encompass more than one religious approach." (Canda, E. & Furman, L.D. 1999, p.243 cited in Fitch et al, 2009, p.2). Therefore, it is understandable that the Chinese Government would prefer the paradigm shift from a focus of Christianity religious faith to a diversified non-religious based Spirituality Education. It is well documented that Spirituality Education is a kind of education which does not necessarily encompass any elements of religious faith at all. Spirituality is generally taken as "the human quest for personal meaning and mutual relationships among people, nonhuman environment and for some god." (ibid, 2009).

Having said that, due to the different interpretation of "spirituality" by the practitioners, the actual impact of implementing spirituality elements in the school curriculum is minimal.

The situation has long been lingered on in this way until the issue of the 2006 Guide to Pre-Primary Education that advocates a humanistic, child-centred educational approach, then there is an official expectation that all preschools need to adopt this approach. If certain schools, such as faith schools, prefer to pursue a contrary approach by adopting a religious-cultural

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transmission model of teaching, then they are putting themselves at risk of failing to be judged as quality education providers, which may affect their application for the school voucher scheme. It is in here that the issue of educational inequality peeps in.

The misconceptualisation on the essence of spiritual/spirituality is responsible for educational inequality. A review of the literature suggests that the Judeo-Christian, Muslim and Orthodox Jewish traditions emphasis a heavily top-down teaching environment that underscores the social interaction expected from students. Therefore, the teaching of RE amongst these cultural groups is associated with a teacher-centred approach and didactic pedagogy (True, 2009).

Traditional education, according to Layman, J. (1998, p.92), a Christian educator is inculcated with the dominant religion and language of the culture. In terms of curriculum, there was and remains a high level of attention paid to time-honoured academic knowledge. There is a need for both a society endowed with traditional cultural values and religious organisations to transmit to the next generation the skills, facts and (fixed) standards of moral and social conduct (to produce law-abiding citizens rather than liberal democratic citizens) that adults deem to be necessary for the next generation's material and social success (not to mention the direct transmission of Biblical knowledge through revelation in the Christian tradition). It is therefore understandable that RE is intertwined with a more traditional and didactic educational transmission model. Cross reference of this justifications, please refer to the author's earlier explanation in this article.

Justification to conduct research for clarifying Spirituality Education to that of Religious Education

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It is found that in actual implementation of Religious Education and Spirituality Education, a chain of practices was found to exist between the old and the new paradigm. This situation has even intensified the problem of misconception, instead of lessening the confusion. Hong Kong is not alone to have this kind of mixed 'half-way' house practises, this situation could be found and indeed been valued in countries like England, for example, OFSTED (The National Curriculum, the Office for Standards in Education) and the National Curriculum Council (NCC) in the United Kingdom mention that three kinds of approach, ranging from a narrowly defined worship and teaching of Religious Education (RE) to a broad, humanistic conceptualisation of spiritual development, have application to the whole curriculum (Watson, 2007).

Echoing to the chain of practices, Hay and Nye (2006) also valued the mixed practices by suggesting the array of conceptions could be placed on a continuum. What these researchers in England are suggesting is that if religious education programmes in faith schools are to nurture the spirituality of students, then the notion of responsible partnering of Religious Education and Spirituality Education may present a possible way forward, and enable students to make sense of their world in relation to the question of faith (Ota, 2001).

Judging from the different interpretations of the term 'spirituality' in Hong Kong and its resulting confused 'half-way' form of curriculum and pedagogical practices, it becomes justifiable to implement the present research through informal classroom activities to facilitate the exploration of children's spirituality in the implementation of the holistic curriculum in its genuine form.

To start with, the author has conducted research with young children in order to understand their concept of God and their spirituality aspect exhibited both in the formal setting

Research on Children's Concepts of God and Spirituality and its Implications on of RE lessons and the informal curriculum of art play (Mooney, B. & Timmins, F. 2007, 275). As most of the faith schools are familiar to the traditional Religious lesson format so as to transmit Biblical knowledge (with God's concepts) to the young children, it is justifiable to explore whether these faith schools would identify the difference between the different God concepts manifested by the children via the implementation of Spirituality Education and Religious Education respectively.

Aim of the Research

The aim of the research is to trace dimensions in the concepts of God manifested by preschoolers, teachers and parents, to document what young children know and believe about God and the related issue of spirituality (of the Chinese cultural beliefs) orally and by pictures/artwork that the children drawn, and to assess God concepts of parents and teachers and to see if they have an influence on Young children's concepts of God and spirituality by interviews. It is anticipated that the data collected will reflect how and from whom God concepts were formed or developed that are affecting the lives of these kindergarten children. There is no priori assumption as to what the 'origins' of God should be like.

The Approach of the Study

Qualitative research method has been used with participant observation, interviews and conversations with children and their caretakers (parents and teachers), and gathering of drawings and art work being the sources of data collection. In order to set the scene for children's involvement in the drawing, props such as story books of different themes, ranging

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from biblical story books, fairy tales, story books with classical stories; and story books with contemporary stories were used.

A researcher with two research assistants have involved in collecting data from a Catholic kindergarten, a Buddhist kindergarten and an Islamic kindergarten in this research. The date of the visit to the Catholic kindergarten was respectively on 5th and 10th of February, 2009. The visit to the Buddhist kindergarten was on 23 February 2009 while the visit to the Islamic kindergarten was on 21 May 2009.. Forty minutes to one hour has been spent in classroom observation of two to six target children in the K3 class (children aged 5 to 6 years of age) for each of these kindergartens respectively. These target children were selected by teachers after gaining consent from the children's parents. Depending on the arrangement of the schools, the research team has participated in a whole class lesson for about 10 to 15 minutes which then followed by the free play activity in children's class, in the informal group activities of children's drawing. By talking with the children, researchers understand the display of religious knowledge and/or spirituality elements of the young children through the informal free play activities. Two hours were spent on interviewing the adult caretakers (principals, teacher as well as the parents) of the target children in the K3 class of these kindergartens. Data were collected by photo-taking, audio-taping, video-taping the conversation among the children and their teacher during the activities, as well as interviewing the teachers and the children's parents after the lesson. A semi-structured questionnaire is designed to guide the researchers to solicit answers from the teachers and parents. Data was triangulated by the feedback of the teachers and parents as to confirm or to adjust the analysis of the description made by the researchers.

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Field notes would be kept as to scribble notes after each visit. Data would be triangulated by soliciting parents' and teachers' feedback concerning their observations of the correctness of the description made by the researchers. At the same time, parents and teachers would be asked to discuss their own concepts of God as revealed in the questionnaires filled to those displaced by their children.

Findings

The most important findings of this concepts of God and Spirituality research have affirmed the fact that in the traditional teacher-led Religious class, children could acquire most of the religious knowledge taught directly by the teacher, whereas when given an opportunity to express their 'opinion' about the Religious figure (such as the Christian God, the Buddha in the Buddhist religion, and the Allah in the Islamic religion) of their respective faith through the informal classroom activity such as picture drawing, children would 'create' meanings for the Religious figure.

Space does not permit the author to present each of the various texts of the research, and that the findings of this concepts of God and Spirituality research could not possibly generalize the whole phenomenon in Religion and Spirituality in all the faith schools in Hong Kong due to its sample size, it did genuinely recorded the prominent characteristics of Spirituality that could reflect in the informal play time of the children. Echoing what has been discussed earlier in this article, the free expression of children and their creation of meaning for the picture are the outcome of Spirituality and it could be argued by the author that this outcome is indeed the psychological needs of children as well. To support this argument, one might refer to what William James, a philosopher and psychologist, has written in his "*Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*" for an understanding of 'Spirituality'. Spirituality or

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personal religion is a modern terminology, which is quite separate from religiosity. Spirituality focuses on the individual person (rather than institutional religion). Here, William James sought explanations in psychology rather than theology (James, W, 1982, cited in Bigger, 2008, p.60). Following on this line of thoughts, spirituality is the expression of individual's quest for meaning, a quest for expression spiritually according to the needs of their heart. Canda et al (1999, p.243, cited in Fitch et al, 2009, p.2) explain that spirituality is the quest for personal meaning and mutual relationships among people, nonhuman environment and for some god. The paradigm of the Spirituality Education in young children which enshrines interconnectedness (Taggart, 2001) is essentially the holistic education advocated in the child-centred ideology. If the faith schools are to use the informal child-centred approach in the direction as suggested in the Government policy documents, children could learn how to express themselves creatively, though at the expense of learning the 'orthodox' religious knowledge of any kind of established religious faith. What the children have developed would be what is termed as Spirituality development instead of the acquisition of 'genuine' Religious Knowledge.

On the other hand, Religious Education is "traditionally" underpinned by the teacher-centred ideology due to the need to transmit traditional religious values to the younger generation. The findings in this research have therefore confirmed the fact that when the faith schools have taught the Religious class in the traditional didactic way, they could transmit the faith/doctrine 'faithfully' to the young children. [An example is in a case study of a Catholic kindergarten when the children are told by the teacher to follow her way of making the sign of the cross before and after prayers, they will follow closely on what they are asked to do. The making of the cross sign is a universal ritualistic practice of the followers of the Catholic religion. In this case study,](#)

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photographic evidence was collected to show how children followed closely with what their teacher was demonstrating through her didactic transmission of knowledge.

Another example to show how the traditional religious teacher transmits RE (Religious Education) in a didactic way was found in a Buddhist kindergarten. Photographic evidence and video episode were captured which show how children were found listening in a receptive manner while their teacher did most of the talking.

The programme runs in this half day Buddhist kindergarten would be organized as to impart the Buddhist religious knowledge to the children first before asking them to engage in informal learning engagement of various disciplines. It was found that children would acquire solid Buddhist religious knowledge while the teacher engaged them in the whole class teaching. In this activity, the teacher is the centred and authoritative figure and teaches her class didactically. The degree of variation from the taught image of Buddha at school was found varied though, which depends on the parental influence (their religious belief system) at home. Similar findings are collected from the Islamic Kindergarten.

In order to show the contrast in the outcome exhibited by children under the formal and informal pedagogical practises of the teacher, photographic evidences and video episodes were collected. In this informal group activity time, the children are left free to choose among a limited number of activities of their choice. It is during this informal group activity time that the children are found to create meaning to their pictures drawn about the Buddha.

These episodes were data collected in the concepts of God and Spirituality research. Similar examples could be found in two other researches that the author of this article has observed, say in the Taoist kindergarten and the Protestant kindergarten (Lau, 2010b; Cheng, D., Lau, G., Benson, P. & Fung, K.H. ,2009). Hence, the findings of this phenomenon have cross

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reference and are not isolated cases. In short, Religious Education is underpinned by the teacher-centred ideology due to the need to transmit traditional religious values to the younger generation. The findings in this research have therefore confirmed the fact that when the faith schools have taught the Religious class in the traditional didactic way, they could transmit the faith/doctrine 'faithfully' to the young children. Whereas if the faith schools are to use the informal child-centred approach in the direction as suggested in the Government policy documents, children can learn how to express themselves creatively, even at the expense of jeopardizing the teaching of any kind of religious faith in an orthodox way.

It follows that what the children have developed would be what is termed as the Spirituality development instead of the acquisition of 'genuine' Religious Knowledge. This is precisely where the concern of this article lies, that is the question of educational inequality for the faith schools which prefer to use the traditional teacher-centred approach to transmit the religious knowledge to the children. If they have failed to do so, they would be at stake for labeled as not a Quality school in face of the Education Reform policy which has adopted the child-centred humanistic ideology. The inequality issue is further complicated if the faith schools have misconceptualized Religious Education as Spirituality Education, thereby to continue teaching the Religious class in a didactic way thinking that SE is near synonyms for Religious Education. [Following on this misconception of ideological stance, it is common practice for many of the long established renounced traditional faith schools in Hong Kong to apply the didactic pedagogical practices in teaching other academic disciplines as a separate subject rather than just the RE throughout the day's programme.](#) It is found quite often in the ECE field that these schools were labeled as schools which could not provide quality education to the young children and thereby the granting of the school vouchers to them would be

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jeopardized. It is saddened to read the report from a local newspaper clipping that since the implementation of the school voucher scheme in September 2007, there are already 111 kindergartens which have closed down. Among them non-profit making kindergartens account for the majority cases (Li, P.Y. 2010).

Those outlined below suggest the emergence of the characteristics which demonstrate the essence of spirituality in young children. The existence of this characteristic, however, presents a challenge for Religious Education, in particular for those programmes which operate within faith schools where the Christian (including Catholics and Protestant) narrative forms a source of the authoritative wisdom to be handed on to its students.

Research data collected from a Catholic Kindergarten

Case 1: Rose, female, aged 5½

Description

Rose drew a lady with a little boy standing beside her. Rose named the lady "Maria" and the little boy "Jesus" by writing words on the drawing. It can be seen that there were lights radiating from the lady Maria and the little boy Jesus. A star can be seen in the design of both the robes of the lady and the little boy. It can be observed that the lady besides wearing her veil has a halo on top of her veil. The little boy has short hair and a halo on his head. The teacher, in the post-observation conference with the author has confirmed that she has taught these concepts to the child in her subject-based religious lesson before.

Understanding gained by the teachers, parents and the researcher team:

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The drawing of the lady Maria and the little boy Jesus clearly shows that Rose has borrowed the idea from a picture of the mother of God, Jesus and the infant Jesus in her arm. As confirmed by the head of school, the captioned picture can be seen not only in the classroom but throughout the school building. The understanding gained by the teachers, parents and the researchers is that the religious environment provided in the school does have an impact on the learning of 'religiosity' by the young children.

The light radiating from the lady and the little boy is described by Rose as magic power, something like the laser, which is going to protect the lady and the little boy. This interpretation of Rose was confirmed by the class teacher in a dialogue exchange after Rose has finished her drawing. In here, one could see how Rose has 'created' her own meaning on the picture that she has drawn.

In here, the teachers, parents and the researchers agreed that the drawing of Rose shows that the image of God is anthropomorphic, in that Rose conceives God as being a little boy and with physical limitations as both the little boy and the lady needs protection from an unknown power manifested by the radiating magic laser. It is agreed that the image of God and His mother perceived by Rose reflect the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church in that both of the figures wear traditional costumes as appeared in the holy pictures she was shown. The gender of God is male and is therefore consistent with the traditional teaching of the Church.

In a conversation with the mother of Rose in a conference of sharing, Rose's mother confirmed to the researchers and the teachers that although none of the family members has been baptised in the Christian faith, she encouraged Rose to attend a Sunday class in a Protestant run Church. It is the belief of Rose's mother that getting her daughter to receive religious knowledge is in tune with the formation of moral values for the child. To this sharing of Rose's mother, the

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researcher was a bit surprised. It is because the school that Rose is studying is a Catholic run religious school and that the Christian religious knowledge provided should be suffice for her character formation. This query has led the researcher to further exploring the underlying reasons, perhaps the pedagogy employed by the teacher or the curriculum content of the school, for this unusual phenomenon.

Case 2: Ada, female, aged 5½

Description

Ada has drawn a very attractive and colourful picture. According to Ada's mother, the use of colour scheme matches with the energetic and somehow rebellious character of her daughter. In the middle of Ada's drawing, one could see a fashionable lady, wearing high heeled shoes, her curly hair seen to have been perm. The fashionable lady is wearing an elegant blouse and a shirt decorated with four stars. The lady is holding a rod. There are lights radiating from the lady. The lady is encircled by a protection 'shelter'. Outside this protection 'shelter', a child is seen kneeling down with her face facing the lady's direction. Big stars are drawn to occupy the empty space of the paper. Beside the stars, Ada has written the word "angel".

Understanding gained by the teachers, parents and the research team:

Same as Rose, Ada has identified the lady as the mother of God by her writing on her drawing. The teacher has clarified the doubts for both the parents and the researchers in that the child with its gesture seems to beg money from the lady, is in fact giving thanks to the lady as coins can be found in a dish in front of the kneeling child. If the teacher did not ask the child to

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explain her drawing, it becomes difficult for the viewer to understand the details of expression by the child.

To Ada, the male figure of God does not appear in her drawing. All one could say perhaps is that Ada has mixed up the role of the mother of God with that of God. It could be the case that the mother of God is the feminine God's figure perceived through the eyes of Ada. From the information obtained from Ada's mother, Ada is asked to be baptised a Catholic following Ada's mother conversion to the Catholic faith after arriving from Mainland China. Ada's perception of the mother of God as a Goddess figure might be due to the syncretistic understanding of Ada's mother by mixing the Chinese cultural Goddess with that the Christian mother of God. If so, this feminine Goddess is not 'faceless', but rather a person with whom one can have a close relationship.

Unlike the traditional teaching of the Catholic church, Ada has created her own meaning of the stars; she named them "Devil" initially but has changed her mind to re-identify the stars as 'angels' when the teacher exchanged her ideas with her. Ada's mother was kind enough to provide further information to the teachers and the researchers on understanding her daughter's obsession with the figure "Devil" when being asked by the researcher. Ada's mother said that a week before the research was conducted, the priest mentioned the Devil in his sermon and taught the child to be good in order to avoid the temptation of the Devil. After that, the topic of Devil has been used between the mother and the child. Whenever Ada's mother requested Ada to behave well or else the Devil will come to attack her, Ada would answer back that the Devil would not be watching all the time. One could observe how Ada is trying to justify her own understanding of the "Devil" by creating meaning to match her imagination.

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The rod in the hand of the lady is not the same rod appear in the picture of the mother of God throughout the school campus. As explained by the teacher, Ada said that the rod is a kind of magical rod, which is used by a cartoon figure in the media.

From what Ada has drawn in her drawing, it is found that the child is very sensitive to the needs of the disadvantaged, such as the poor. The reason why Ada has chosen to draw a beggar in her drawing might be explained by her life experience in a weekend before when Ada's mother took the child to a shopping mall. In a street nearby the shopping mall, the mother and the child found a beggar begging for money. The child then wanted the mother to give the beggar money and was rejected by the mother who explained that they themselves are also poor. The child responded by saying that, "Okay, I will try my best to study hard in order to earn more money and could give the money to the beggar for their needs". One could see the humanistic approach of Ada to deal with the problem of poverty. She thinks in a very human way as to use one's ability to provide alms to the poor on one hand. While on the other hand, she is helpless as a young child to give instant help to the beggar, therefore she turns to the mother of God as if the latter has the power as a Goddess to answer her prayer.

To the teacher of the faith school, Ada's creation of meaning for the story seems odd in the Catholic religious tradition, however, to the advocates of Spirituality Education (Priestly, 1997; Woods, 1996), arguments have been in favour of the affective or experiential approach of 'the weaving the threads of meaning' by children into the child-centred curriculum.

[Research data collected from the Buddhist Kindergarten](#)

Case 1: Harry, male, aged 5½

Description

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Harry was asked to draw a Buddha during his play activity time. As could be seen in the picture drawn by Harry, the figure is obviously a human but with wings. Harry understands that Buddha is a human even his appearance is different from ordinary people. To Harry, Buddha wears an orange costume and shows one side of his shoulders. He has a necklace. Apart from that, the Buddha is just like an ordinary man with big eyes and wearing smile in his face. Hence, one could say that Harry's concept of God is a mixture of human and angel. On one hand, Harry describes Buddha as a good man who helps and teaches people, on the other hand, Buddha cannot be reached, thus a somehow angelic figure appears which suggests the status of Buddha as a half-man and a half-angel with wings.

When Harry was asked by the researcher about where Buddha lives, he gave no response initially by expressing that he did not know. When the researcher encouraged him to answer, he then replied that Buddha might be living in 'Heaven'.

Given this answer, Harry might have experienced confusion when the researcher asked him whether there is a God/Gods. Harry responded by saying that he did not know whether there is a God or not, yet he attempted to imagine that some Gods are male while some are females. Gods have wings so that they could fly in the sky. Gods live in the sky and they are happy. At times, Gods will fight each other.

Understanding gained by the teachers, parents and researchers:

Harry mentioned that when he is sad or in trouble, he will resort to Buddha for help and guidance though he did not know where he is and could not find him. When Harry was asked why he will turn to Buddha for help, Harry replied that Buddha is willing to help people. Harry's

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concept of Buddha as a benevolent figure corresponds with Tamminen, (1979, 1983b) findings in that, "quite often these youngsters also mention moral situations when they had done something wrong and had been forgiven." If Harry is to perceive Buddha in this way, Buddha could possibly become a God-like figure in his mind who could answer his 'prayer'.

When Harry was asked whether there is a God or Gods, Harry seems to recall his God's concepts from the Chinese fairy tales he watched in the T.V. programmes. In here, the cultural factor comes into sight.

While the child may have formed an idea of God, that child does not necessarily believe that such a being exists. It seems to the researcher that Harry only learnt from his teacher during the whole class teaching of the knowledge of Buddha. The message put forward by the teacher was about the birth of Buddha and how he has become a Buddha. Nothing was mentioned about the super-nature of a God-like figure as Buddha is a human by nature and that he has never claimed himself to be a God. The teachings he left for his followers were only combined into books a long time after his death. His teachings were mainly moral issues based on an experience of the savor of life.

From the examples just mentioned, it could be observed that the role played by the researchers in the position of an adult caretaker has exerted influence in the child. It is through the guided, semi-guided and open questions solicited by the adult that Harry could be led to provide answers that he has previously acquired from his class teacher or to be led to create meanings and answers out of his imaginations. This finding is echoing the data collected in the Catholic kindergarten and in the Islamic kindergarten.

In a post research conference with the teachers and parents, it was understood that Harry's family members do not have any religious belief. Hence, it could be deduced that all the religious

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concepts of Harry was picked up in school. In an interview with the school head, the researcher could confirm this fact as the school head said, "I believe in mercy which is emphasised in Buddhism." The school head explained that people have to be nice to others so as to alleviate their sufferings. The class teacher believes the doctrine of Karma(因果) and mercy (慈悲) which changes her mind and the ways of how she interacts with others, even in teaching. She claims that she has gained in understanding that everyone could practice mercy (慈悲), be good to others, and not just Buddha or Avalokiteshvara (菩薩) could do so. The ways of thinking of the teacher and the school head both have exerted influences in the formation of religious concepts of the Buddha to Harry through direct teaching.

Case 2: Jason, male, aged 5½

Description

It could be seen from Jason's picture that the Buddha appears as a human and could be considered to be physical and anthropomorphic. Jason described Buddha as the same as us, he can walk and talk. Jason understands that Buddha is a good man as he helps people and teaches people to do good things. Though Jason said that Buddha never helped him and he has never met him. Jason had no idea of where Buddha is though he guesses that Buddha might live in the temple. That is the reason why Jason drew a picture of temple (look like a cage given his ability to draw a temple at his young age).

When Jason was asked whether he knows something about God/Gods, Jason responded confidently that God is in heaven. In heaven, there are clouds and the sun. As human beings, Jason could not go to heaven but God could. Therefore, Buddha could not live in heaven as he is a human. Buddha could only live in temple. The gender of God to Jason is a male figure.

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Jason has equated God with Buddha in terms of their roles as law-givers and law-enforcers. Jason said that God and Buddha would get angry with him if he did something wrong or not being properly behaved. Nevertheless, when Jason is being asked whom would he turned to when he is in need of help, the answer is God. It is because Jason thinks that God is more powerful than Buddha.

Understanding gained by the teachers, parents and researchers:

As could be identified from Jason's drawing and conversation, Buddha to him is a human being who could walk and talk like us. To Jason, the image of Buddha is not so much a God-figure since the adult caretakers of Jason supplemented extra background information by telling that Jason's father is a Christian. Therefore the image of God formed in Jason's mind is a Christian God instead of the Buddha.

It was found that young children acquire their 'orthodox' concepts from adults who intended to teach' them, while the spirituality aspect of young are mostly initiated from the children themselves. This finding matched with the data collected in the Catholic kindergarten and in the Islamic kindergarten.

[Research data collected from the Islamic Kindergarten](#)

Case 1 of the Islamic Kindergarten : Dora (fictitious name), aged 6

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Since the mother of Dora is a woman with strong Islamic faith, her daughter has acquired the Islamic faith by home tutoring of her parents. It was found that Dora when even given the freedom to draw whatever she likes, she was found drawn a picture of Mega.

Case 2 in the Islamic kindergarten: Anita (fictitious name), female, aged 6

Anita has drawn a swimming suit mermaid and told the researchers that this is one of her favorite stories she came across among the other classical western stories, like the Cinderella, Snow White...and the other fairy tales. To the parents of this faith school, Anita's creative drawing of the mermaid and to create meaning for the story seems odd in the Islamic religious tradition, however, to the advocates of spirituality education (Priestly, 1997; Woods, 1996), arguments have been in favor of the affective or experiential approach of 'the weaving the threads of meaning' by children into the child-centred curriculum (Lau, 2010a).

Understanding gained by the teachers, parents and researchers

It was found from this research that young children acquire their concepts from adults who intended to 'teach' them in this Islamic kindergarten in Hong Kong, the transmission of Islamic faith is basically carried out by home tutoring and by taking the religious knowledge in the Mosque. The role of the teachers in this school is to teach children the subject-based curriculum and at times the preliminary form of integrated curriculum by using the teacher-centred pedagogy. This practice as observed in the research could help instill in young children a receptive mind to 'obey' what the adult teaches and hence, enable the transmission of RE at home by the parents. By contrast, the creativity aspect of young children are mostly initiated from the children themselves by weaving the threads of meaning from her immediate environment. This creation of meaning is best observed while children are having their informal classroom activities, such as drawing.

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As such, the meaning making and world views of students themselves in the classroom context cannot be ignored, and this may present a challenge for religious educators in Faith contexts who attempt to pass on a particular Faith tradition.

Variables such as the orthodox understanding of the Islamic Faith, the curriculum content and pedagogy employed by the teacher...etc. would impact on young children's formation of either the concepts of God (Allah) from the traditional 'religious' sense, or to follow their interests in secular things that attract them in daily life.

Educational Inequality for the minority ethnic Muslim children in Hong Kong under the school voucher scheme

As we understand from the literature review that the Muslim traditions emphasis a heavily top-down teaching environment that underscores the social interaction expected from students. Therefore, the teaching of Religious Education amongst these cultural groups is associated with a teacher-centred approach and didactic pedagogy (True, 2009).

When the 2006 Guide advocates a humanistic, child-centred educational approach, then there is an official expectation that all preschools need to adopt this approach. If certain schools, such as religious schools, prefer to pursue a contrary approach by adopting a religious-cultural transmission model of teaching, then they are putting themselves at risk of failing to be judged as quality education providers, which may affect their application for the school voucher scheme.

This situation not only jeopardises the efficient implementation of educational reform in Hong Kong, but may also result in educational inequality for stakeholders.

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This is in particular the case when taken into mind the operation of the school voucher scheme in Hong Kong, which is based on the free choice of the parents to choose the preferred education for their children, the demarcation between the 'genuine' cultural-transmission curriculum model with that of the liberal humanistic religious education model must be clarified or else the misunderstanding on the part of the school-voucher holders (the parents) would become an ethical issue. Clarification must be made for the parents, so that they could make the right choice for the education of their children.

By taking the present study of the Islamic school as an example to illustrate the above mentioned, one would realize the implications of the issue raised. Thanks for the parents' tutoring of the Islamic religious knowledge to their children at home, the children in this school, with the moderate curriculum, could still exhibit the Islamic faith. However, when given the opportunities for an informal settings, children would immediately drawn pictures out of their self-pursuit and self-interest, as in the case of Anita, who draw the 'swimming suit' mermaid.

But how about the other Islamic schools, which operated under the school voucher scheme? As far as the author of this article has understood, unlike the Islamic Kindergarten under study, there are Islamic Kindergartens in Hong Kong who would permit their teachers to practise the 'liberal approach' by content and pedagogy. The application of liberal pedagogic practises are even found widely practised in those non-religious schools or schools with other religious practise with intake of Muslim children, like the Pakistani and the Indonesian children.

In either of the cases, the phenomenon is not fair to the Muslim children. In the case of the Islamic Kindergarten of the present study, the Kindergarten would run a risk of being labelled as not a 'quality' school since the methodology and curriculum content being practised are of the traditional teacher-centre, the cultural-transmission one.

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Discussion

From the data analyzed, it could be confirmed that there is a dimension of religious and spirituality in young children. It could be found that the formation of the concepts of God in young children varies with different children.

It was also found that young children acquire their concepts from adults who intended to 'teach' them, while the spirituality aspect of young children are mostly initiated from the children themselves by weaving the threads of meaning from her life experience. This creation of meaning is best observed while children are having their informal classroom activities, such as drawing. Children could construct the spirituality concepts in their social world and from information in their culture while interacting with them. The research reported in this article suggests that children's wondering leads them to draw from an eclectic range of frameworks in order that they can create meaning for themselves. They include, but are not limited to the Christian story. As such, the meaning making and world views of students themselves in the classroom context cannot be ignored, and this may present a challenge for religious educators in faith contexts who attempt to pass on a particular faith tradition. Research conducted in Australia has arrived at the same conclusion (Hyde, 2008, p.242-243) while conducting research with children in the Catholic primary schools.

The teachers, parents and the researchers have gained understanding in this research that Religious Education could help the young children learn some "orthodox" religious knowledge which otherwise through the indirect means of teaching Spirituality Education could be more difficult to achieve. It is because basically these two kinds of education underpinned by two

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different belief systems that targeting with different realm of epistemology. Therefore, the teaching of Religious Education should still have its place in schools which emphasizes the teaching of revealed religious knowledge. Variables such as the orthodox understanding of the Catholic faith and the other religious faith mentioned in this article, the curriculum content and pedagogy employed by the teacher...etc. would impact on young children's formation of either God's concept from the traditional 'religious' sense, the interim 'spiritual' sense or in the developmental psychological 'spirituality' sense.

The consequences of misconception on the part of the stakeholders (ECE practitioners, parents and policy makers) would bring forth the following inequality issues as long as the school voucher scheme is in operation.

- (a) The 'half-way' house approach adopted by many preschools means that parents are incorrectly guided when choosing schools for their children;
- (b) If schools misunderstand the child-centred approach advocated by the 2006 Guide, then they may adhere to the approach only to meet the requirements of the quality assurance exercise. Once they have passed this assessment, they may revert to the traditional mode of education, i.e., a teacher-centred curriculum and didactic pedagogy. This situation not only impedes the promotion of the child-centred approach, but also leads to the misuse of public funds;
- (c) If schools with a religious background are forced to adopt a child-centred approach, or are misled into doing so, then this may be in conflict with their traditional religious curriculum and pedagogic practices and may have implications for the preservation of freedom of religion;
- (d) Schools that do not adhere to child-centred ideological practice, but rather remain loyal to traditional religious practices by employing a teacher-centred ideology, will not be graded as

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quality schools under the terms of the 2006 Guide, they may not be eligible for the school voucher scheme and may thus lose out in the allocation of government resources.

In connection with the ethical issues arising from educational inequality, the author found in her previous research that parents will opt for another school if they find that the school they had initially chosen for their children does not match their expectations. As a consequence of parents frequently switching schools under the school voucher scheme, schools' administrative workload has increased two-fold.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the data already collected, this research on the concept of God and Spirituality has found that one of the reasons for causing the roadblocks to the education reform is the misconception on Religious Education and the Spirituality Education.

As parents have tremendous influence in fostering their children's acquisition or development of religious concepts, parents should be better informed of this findings. Teachers alike should be alerted to adopt the relevant kind of pedagogy as this will also have direct impact on the formation of religious concepts of the young child. It was also found that through the didactic teaching of teachers in subjects other than the religious knowledge, the kind of habitual atmosphere and classroom environment has in turn facilitate the transmission of religious knowledge in a subtle way. A lack of clarity over the definition of Spirituality Education and methods for its practical application has hindered the effective implementation of ECE reform. This situation has not only jeopardized the efficient implementation of educational reform in Hong Kong, but may also result in educational inequality for stakeholders, especially to the

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parents who have preferred to educate their children in the Catholic faith tradition or a particular kind of faith tradition by receiving education in the faith school.

This is in particular the case when taken into mind the operation of the school voucher scheme in Hong Kong, which is based on the free choice of the parents to choose the preferred education for their children. The demarcation between Religious Education and Spirituality has to make clear for the parents, this is so no matter or not they are to choose the child-centred 'holistic' spirituality curriculum, the teacher-centred religious subject-based curriculum or a mixed one. The clarification would become an ethical issue and has to be clarified so that parents could make the right choice for the education of their children.

Apart from the educational inequality issue, the educational reform which requires all [non-profit making](#) schools participating in the school voucher scheme to implement a child-centered spirituality curriculum may have a more important hidden agenda behind it which deserves the attention of stakeholders with a religious faith. It is because the agenda might jeopardize the transmission of faith in the school. However, since most of the faith schools in Hong Kong actually have a curriculum situated in a continuum between the two polar ends of the ideologies due to their misconception of RE and SE, is this half-way situation acceptable then?

While a complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to point out some direction for further research work.

According to the understanding of the author of this article, the stakeholders and the academics circle in Hong Kong, whether working in the ECE field or not, if not interested in the relationship between religion and education, may not be able to understand that Spirituality education need not be taught as a separate subject, because its features have already been included in the Child-centered curriculum advocated in the ECE education reform.

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As a result of this misunderstanding, it is widely accepted in the academic circle the operation of these two concepts within school. [For example in an informal interview with some academics in Hong Kong a year ago, the author of this article was told that they \(the academics\)](#) hold the stance that “developing spiritual competence requires an understanding between the relationship of religion and spirituality which can be perceived as being inter-related or dualistic in nature developing”. However, as can be seen in the findings of this Concept of God and Spirituality research that it is not necessarily truth and beneficial to the faith schools if they are to practise both paradigms within a school curriculum or operate the curriculum in a continuum. The consequence of this misunderstanding will not only create the issue of educational inequality in the school voucher scheme but will also jeopardize the transmission of ‘orthodox’ faith in the traditional faith schools, like the Catholic, the Buddhist and the Islamic schools, as demonstrated by those cases discussed in this article. Finally, the author of this article wishes to pose the following questions for the readers to reflect on.

1. Whether different understanding creates obstacles or opportunities for early childhood education reform?
2. Whether the misunderstanding has an “equalitarian imperative” issue to be addressed in a pluralistic democratic society?
3. What does equal treatment in education mean? By reflecting on what (a) Rousseau (1913, p.174) once said “many inequalities created by nature about which we can do nothing but religious life can be thought to belong to that other category of inequality, and the (b) Christian educator says, “Humanists must accept and even champion the cause of Christian schools as an unrestrained choice for parents and children who believe that this is the way to

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truth. Humanists must champion the equal opportunity of Christian schools if they are to affirm the freedom of expression for all in a pluralistic society.”(Edlin, 1999, p.34).

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