

## THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND ITS EVOLUTION IN CHILDREN: A CASE OF MONTESSORI SCHOOL IN CAPE COAST

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### ABSTRACT

*Children's spirituality is important, especially to those entrusted with their education. The purpose of this study therefore, is to find out the lived experience of God and its evolution in children. The study was guided by 3 research questions. The research sample consisted of 30 respondents. The research is guided by the qualitative methodology of phenomenology, the purpose of which is to uncover the lived experience of phenomena from the perspective of those who experience it. Data collecting methods were artwork, guided open-interviews and written expression. The study established that the concept of God that 4 to 5 year group, 8 to 9 year group and 10 to 11 year group had were: "provider", "protector", friend and caretaker"; "creator", "protector", "provider, "great and creator" respectively. The study further revealed that the experience of God that the respondents go through could best be described as "none", 'subliminal', "occasional" or 'everyday". To effectively nurture children's spirituality, parents, teachers and ministers would benefit in knowing how young people experience God and their lived experience of God evolves.*

### Introduction

Little research has been done in the area of young children's' experience of God and how it evolves in them. Although some researchers have paid attention to the spiritual development of young people (Dantley, 2005; Delpise & White-Bradley, 2003, Dillard, 2006, Gearon, 2001), little is known about how children experience God, develop concepts of God and forge relationship with God. An individual's spirituality is a vital component of the person's well being. It is composed of many factors. When this orientation involves an orientation towards a supreme being (often called God), some of the important factors include how a person conceives God, experiences God and relates to God. These are important elements of the individual's lived experiences of God, that is, they are the way through which individuals see God and actively incorporate this understanding into their everyday relationships and actions. Sole (1990) believes that the object of theology can only be the relationship between God and human beings. This stems from the fact that religion to some extent is all about how man forges an acceptable relationship with God.

Fostering children's' relationship with God

is important in the work of religious educators. Thorn (1993) maintains that one of the key issues in religious education is to teach about God in such a way as to enable individuals to relate to a personal deity in accordance with each person's dignity and uniqueness.

Rizzuto (1979) concludes that children come to school with well developed notions of God. To be able to teach effectively about God and help children in the development of their relationship with God, it could benefit teachers to know what experience of God, concepts of God, relationship with God and language about God their children bring with them into the classroom. However, in the last half century religious education has been dominated by the work of development theorists. Based on Piaget's theory that cognitive development proceeds in clearly definable invariant stages to account for any aspects of religious development, some researchers proposed and defined stages to account for many aspects of religious development. Such research resulted in the accumulation of vast amounts of information about the way children think about religious matters and how such thinking develops with age. However, it provided little



information about how children experience and relate to God or of the understandings and conceptualizations of God that have meaning in the child's life. Valid and useful though such research is, the high profile accorded it had an unfortunate result: the marginalization of research into the more experiential and effective dimension of religion and alternative theories to account for religious development. Despite the domination of stage developmental theory, several theorists conducted research that departed from the popular measurement of religious thoughts and attitudes, and focused more on religious experiences and feelings. wing to the emphasis placed on the cognitive development of religious ideas, there has arisen a consequent neglect within research of the more effective and experiential elements of the religious lives of people and serious neglect of the academic study of spirituality in the lives of individuals. This neglect is also seen in the field of religious education. Hill (1988) observes that spirituality is the foundation upon which religious education must be built. However, spirituality historically has not received the focus it deserves in religious education.

Nye (1996) commented strongly on this issue:

*Over the past thirty years the dominance of cognitive developmental theory in the field of religious education has led to a severe neglect of the study of the spirituality of the child and a distortion of what goes on in the religious education classroom ...developmental theories at times come near dissolving religion into reason, at the expense of a holistic understanding of what it means to be human (p.26).*

Nye (1996) believes that there is clearly insufficient understanding of the nature of children's spirituality. In particular little is known of children's lived experience of God; that is the thoughts, feelings altitudes, and experiences that inform, and flow from, the child's ontologically significant relationship with God. Today, it is generally acknowledged that children's spirituality differs from that of adults, but a greater inquiry is required of the nature of this phenomenon. Rizzuto (1979) observes that if educationists want to understand the religious progress of a child they must have some

knowledge of the private God the child brings to school. Rizzuto believes that by the time children come to school, they already had well-developed notions of God, of their relationships with God, and of their place in the scheme of things. The central questions addressed by the research are as follows;

### Research Questions

1. What experiences of God do children have?
2. What concepts of God do these children have?
3. How do concepts of God evolve throughout the school years?

### Method

#### Participants

Groups of pupils in Montessori School in the Cape Coast Metropolis were studied: group A (10, 4 and 5 year olds; Group B (10, 8 and 9 year-olds; group C (10 and 11 year-olds). The sample size was 30 participants. The classes of the various age groupings were purposively sampled while the participants in each class sampled through stratified sampling procedure. The age groups served as a basis for the selection of the participants because it helps to explore the progression of student's concepts and experiences about God from the kindergarten level to the Junior high school level.

#### Instruments

1. Three instruments were used for this study. These were artwork, interview and written expression. The first method of obtaining data from the participants was artwork. Thom (1993) argues that art needs to be used as medium of expression, not as an illustration; drawing God concepts needs to be an activity by itself; instructions given must be carefully worded to avoid specifying to the participants the type of response expected by the researcher; and data collection should begin with the drawing process in order to minimize the possibility that participants will trot out the correct answer. The analysis of children's art needs to be approached with care, Kellogg (1972) an art teacher of young children, explains that it is difficult for adults to appreciate and understand children's art because the minds of children and those of adults are so different. This point is a valid



one: a person interested in knowing about the meaning of children's works of art should be wary of placing too much emphasis on their own interpretations of what they see. For this reason, each child was asked to talk about their artwork. They used their own words in describing the meaning of their work. The views of the children concerning their artwork were recorded. The second method of obtaining data from the respondents was interviewing. All the respondents were interviewed. The respondents at the primary level were interviewed in groups of three while the respondents in Junior high school were interviewed individually. An interview guide was used. The analysis of the data was based on the emergent themes. The third method of collecting data was writing. The method enabled the participants to reflect on what they had drawn and said, and to capture this reflection in a piece of written expression. The kindergarten children and the 6 year-old group were asked to think about what they would like to tell God in a letter. This was then inscribed by the adults present. The remaining participants were requested to reflect on their experiences and ideas of God, and to write whatever they liked that captured their reflections. The students were asked to complete this activity the day following their art activities, to give them time to reflect on their ideas and experiences. The artwork was the first data to be examined. The first examination was preliminary; the researcher wanted to get a feel for each picture, to note the researcher's reaction to it, and to note, anything unusual, striking and idiosyncratic about each picture.

The written work was analysed by highlighting words or phrases that seemed significant because they either addressed the central research questions, or because they revealed something individually meaningful. After each piece of writing was examined, it was compared with the artwork of the respondent and initial notes about the artwork to find reinforcing, complementary or contradictory notions.

In addition, the core concept of God

contained in the pictorial and the written data of each respondent was noted. The next step involved reading through the transcript of the interviews, highlighting significant points and making notes about anything that impressed the researcher. The researcher then compared each picture with the explanation of the meaning given by the respondent, in the light of the notes about the ritual reactions. These notes were then added to, with particular attention being paid to discrepancies between the researcher's sense of the picture and the interpretation of the artist. The discrepancies between the artwork, written work, and the interview material of each respondent were examined.

Next, both pictorial and written data were examined to determine the notion of core God concepts. Moreover, the data were examined again to find out an evolution of God concept and of experience of God. During the analytical task, themes and patterns that fit the data were discovered. In writing up the findings, the researcher kept as true as possible to the voices of the participants, and to the intuitive grasp of what the researcher was seeing.

### Procedure

Before data gathering could begin, preliminary matters had to be attended to. Permission was sought from the head of the school and the purpose of the study was explained to the teachers. Consent forms were sent to relevant parents, seeking permission for their children to be involved in the research. The gathering of data started with the kindergarten group (4 and 5 year-olds). Interviewing took place in groups during the week. It became necessary to record the ideas of the children as soon as possible because of their short attention span. They were allowed to listen to segments of the interviews, so they could hear their voices.

In the case of the second group (8 and 9 year-olds), the drawing activity and the written expression activity were conducted during the following two religious education periods. With respect to the third group (10 and 11 year-olds), the drawing activity and the expression were conducted in the first week. During the second week the pupils were interviewed. The artwork lessons followed a similar procedure with all the classes. First, the session was introduced by explaining that artwork is an expression of the ideas and feelings of each



member of the class. Next, without explaining precisely what was going to be done, the materials, coloured pencils and sheets of A4 paper were distributed. These items were used following Furth's (2004) recommendations. The students were then asked to close their eyes and relax. In a low, rhythmic, slow, voice, it was suggested students should imagine themselves in a relaxing, secure place where they felt happy. After a few moments they were asked to observe what thoughts, ideas, words, pictures, sounds, and symbols came to mind when they heard the word "God". After a minute, they were told to gather everything in their minds. They were then asked to open their eyes, and to get down on paper as much as they could of what had occurred to them, in whatever form they choose. As the students worked, the researcher went around the class prompting and encouraging those who were unsure how to start. The next lesson conducted with the whole class was the written expression activity. With the kindergarten class, the children were asked to tell the researcher what they would like to say to God. They were then asked to draw a picture of what they want to say. With the 8-9 year olds, the procedure was basically the same. However, instead of asking children to draw, they were invited to write a letter to God. The procedure for the 10-11 year olds was the same as the previous group. The third face of data gathering was in interviewing. The procedure was the same for all classes. All the issues pertaining to the interview was explained to the students before the interviewing started.

## Results

This section addresses issues pertaining to children's Concept of God, experiences of God and how the Concept of God evolves throughout the school years. The analysis and discussions of these issues are based on year groupings; KG1 and KG2, lower and upper classes and JHS 1 and 2. The KG group of participants comprise ten (10), four (4) and five (5) year old children. The first part of the analytical task was to determine the God Concept of the children. Six (6) core Concepts of God were found and these are: "friend", 'caretaker', 'watcher', 'creator', 'provider' and 'protector. With experiences of God, the four (4) types of responses which came to the fore could best be described as 'None', 'Subliminal' (without awareness), 'Occasional' and 'everyday' experiences.

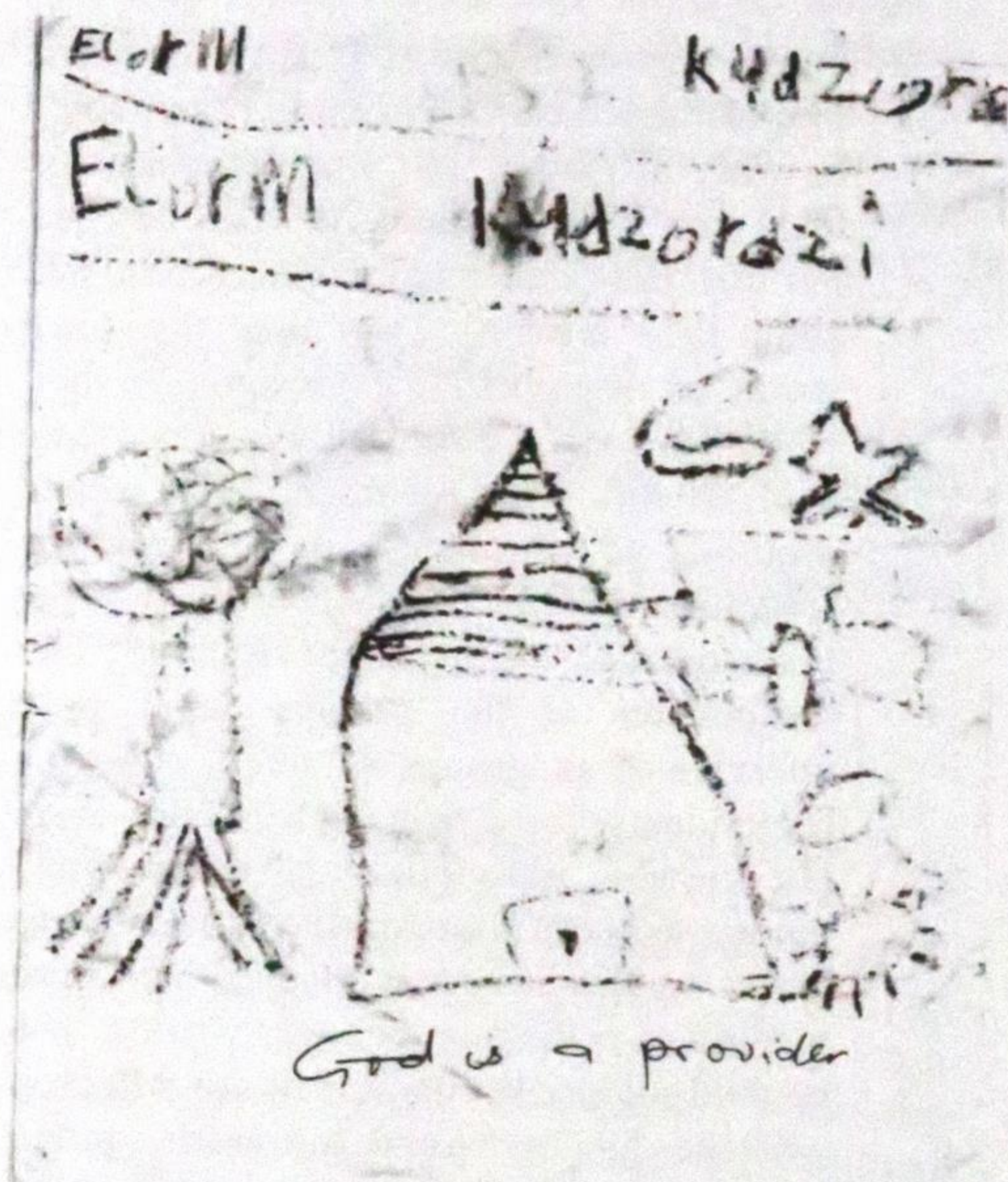


Figure 1: God is a provider

Elorm's picture in figure 1 depicts a house which is surrounded by the moon, stars, a bright light and a tree which is providing a shade for a well built room and the occupants. This picture indicates that, in times of need, God will come to the aid of all those going through difficult times in life. As a consequence, God can be relied upon when all others have failed any individual who is in need. On the issues of experiences of God, Elorm thinks that God is experienced on daily bases because Elorm's needs are always provided. In the case of the 8 to 9 age group, the following finding depicts the group's concept of God.





Figure 2: creator

Napoleon drew a picture portraying an ocean and a number of trees as well as a number of fishes and other animals. This gives an indication that God is a creator hence God expects each and

every individual to do His will. On the issue of the experiences of God, God is encountered occasionally whenever there is a need for Him to protect individual against evil forces.

In the case of year the 10 and 11+ groups, the following were found pertaining to their concept of God.



Figure 3: Creator

Christian's picture depicts the sky interspersed with a bright light, trees, and a young boy sitting in a chair. This indicates that God is the creator of things in the heavens and on the earth. There is therefore the need for all and sundry to

acknowledge this and do His will. The thinking of this respondent is that God is experience everyday.

The last research question sought to find out how the concept of God evolves in young children. The study revealed that there were three evolutionary conceptual patterns; a pronounced move from concrete, personal anthropocentric concept to transcendent, vague, ineffable concept; a progression from the use of concrete and anthropocentric symbols to more abstract forms of symbolism in order to depict God; and a trend of conceptualizing God as a limited adjunct to one's life to a notion of limitless higher being in whose life individuals mysteriously participate.

**Discussion**

According to Hanson (1988), young children's concepts of God are entities with many levels and dimensions. This certainly holds true for this group of respondent. The group conveys concepts that range from literalistic to metaphorical form. It is this range of concept and the varied types of thinking, imagination and meaning making that underline those that continue to amaze and impress observers. From this small sample of ten (10) children, five (5) core concept of God emerged. These concepts represent the central idea of God for these children. They seem to be the temporal results of the children's struggle to integrate the diverse fragments of life experiences, teachings and personal meaning making attempts.

**Table 1**  
**Core God Concept of Kindergarten Group**

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Provider	1	2	3
Protector	3	2	5
Friend	0	1	1
Caretaker	1	0	1

As reported in Table 1 God as a protector is the core concept of the five of these groups. These children seemed to be incorporating their increasing awareness of the world around them and the security concerns that arise in their daily experiences of theft cases, conflict, armed robbery and other evils they experience through the media on daily basis. Insecurity therefore, defines this concept which first of all sees God as a powerful being that is in a position to protect children whenever someone tries



to harm them. However, two of the respondents see God as a friend and a caretaker respectively. This implicit image is characterized by the sense of intimacy which is usually portrayed by the father figure or people who always help the child in times of need is considered as a friend.

In examining the experiences of God, among the children, four types of responses came to the fore and these were termed as 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional' and 'everyday'. These four types of experiences of God provide the platform for the child to make meaning and connect this meaning so as to understand issues pertaining to God.

**Table 2: Types of Experiences of Kindergarten 2**

Core Concept	Girl	Boys	Total
None	1	1	2
Subliminal	1	1	2
Occasional	2	1	3
Everyday	1	2	3

As shown in Table 2 the experiences of God that featured from 'none' were that in times of need God assist them to get whatever pressing need that they are yearning for hence in times of crises like when they are hurt or punished, God is always by their side. Therefore, they experience God occasionally. Moreover, some of the respondents concluded that they experience God on daily basis because they face crises like being hungry or being beaten by police, parents as well as other harmful things that inflict pains on them, but in the face of all these calamities, God is always lurking around to give them a helping hand.

The 8 and 9 year group expresses a variety of concepts that range from traditional to the novel and from literal to metaphoric.

**Table 3:  
Core God Concept of year 8 and 9**

Core concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Creator	2	3	5
Protector	1	1	2
Provider	1	0	1
Wonderful	1	1	2

As shown in 3 God as a creator is a dominant concept of five (5) respondents of this group. These children seemed to have incorporated increasing awareness of the world around them and the

ecological concerns that arise in their scientific learning into their concept of God. God is perceived to be the creator of the whole world and portrayed in various settings as such. A sense of wonder accompanies this concept which first of all sees God as a transcendent, powerful being that lives outside His creation. However, only one of the respondents thinks that God is a provider and as such takes care of the needs and concerns of all those in need.

When it came to issues pertaining to children's experience of God, the respondents were fairly open and forthcoming in their discussions with the researcher.

**Table 4:  
Types of Experiences of lower and upper primary**

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
None	0	1	1
Subliminal	1	0	1
Occasional	1	2	3
Everyday	2	3	5

Within this group, five of the respondents contended that they experienced God on daily basis. These stems from the fact that whenever they are in need and in times of other crises situations, God usually uses other people as instruments to come to their aid particularly in the absence of their parents as well as their relatives.

The 10 to 11 years and above year group expressed varieties of concepts that range from the traditional to the novel and from literal to metaphoric.

**Table 5:  
Variety of Concepts**

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Protector	2	2	4
Provider	2	0	2
Great	2	0	2
Creator	0	2	2

God as a protector is the core concept of 4 respondents of this group. Hanna (1992), asserts that young children at this age group see God through the wonderful and mysterious things that defines everyday activities of God. However, the image of God as "provider", "creator", "Great" are transcendent distant image of God who is not intimately involved with things He has created but who is feared, respected and obeyed because man



depend solely on God for sustenance.

In the case of children's experiences of God, most of these children were fairly opened and forthcoming. In the course of the discussion that followed the pupils' answers, both verbal and non-verbal, gave the researcher insights into the meaning God has on the lives of the respondents. The experiences of God were classified into four categories; 'None', 'Subliminal', 'Occasional' and 'Everyday'.

Table 6  
Types of experiences of the 10 – 11 year and above year group (JHS)

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
None	0	1	1
Subliminal	1	0	1
Occasional	2	2	4
Everyday	2	2	4

Majority of children in this group asserted that they have had an experience with God occasionally and on daily basis. This implies that, on daily basis young children encounter God in their quest to lead a fulfilling life.

Kraft (1993), argues that children spiritual experiences are pre-authentic. However, the researcher strongly disagrees with this statement. The responses of the participants indicate that many children have authentic experiences of God that have impacted on their lives. In addition, these experiences often lead the children to develop a theology that integrates their experiences into a meaningful world view. Moreover, the children's responses individually showed that they were capable of complex theological reasoning.

The children's experiences of God or lack of these greatly influence their concept of God. Also of growing importance are the influences of culture and science, popular films, books, discussions on television and radio present new ways for the children to imagine God and to orient themselves towards God. Adato (1998), concludes that all children regardless of religion or whether they were raised in a faith at all depicts the God they need. This echoes the findings of Hutsebaut (1972), which concluded that a child's image of God is found to satisfy psychological needs.

## Conclusion

Hull (1986), in commenting on religious thinking of pre-school children, argues that, there is

the need for people never to forget how varied and surprising such thought can be. These comments echo the reactions of the researcher of these fascinating 4 to 5 year group of children. It is clear these children were actively involved in discovering the meaning of God in their lives and in developing a theology that named this God. The responses were indeed varied and surprising.

Ascertaining how 4 and 5 year olds think and feel about God and how they experience God is not an easy undertaking. These children function in a way that differs from adults. Some of these differences create difficulties when children and adults communicate. One difference is the ability of these children to be comfortable with paradox. They seemed able to hold two or more apparently contradictory ideas simultaneously without feeling the need to decide on one correct idea.

A second difference is perpetual in nature. These children have not yet learned the categorization of convention that adults apply to life in order to make sense of it. Their perceptions tend to be undifferentiated, that is everything they experience, whether physical, mental or emotional, is regarded as been equally real and valid. In addition, these children do not distinguish their experiences of God from their everyday life. This makes it difficult for them to decide whether they have ever felt God near them. Those children who had experience of God's presence took for granted the idea that this was an everyday part of life and did not view it independently from their other experiences. The children also did not distinguish between what adults will categorize as facts and fantasy. So when they were unable to answer some questions factually, they sometimes resulted to fantasy.

In the case of the 8 to 9 year group, one powerful influencing factor that affects the concept of God of children is children's experiences of God and how the concept of God evolves and their perceptual abilities coupled with their openness to non-physical reality. It is evident from their responses that some of these children are more capable than others with respect to their perception about their sacred dimension of life. If such children also remained open to their experiences, they may continue to grow and evolve spiritually. However, there are many obstacles in their way. One of the most surprising of these is the religious education these children are receiving. Instead of fostering spiritual growth. Religious education seems to



create a dichotomy between person and spiritual experiences and public taught creeds.

Undoubtedly, this outcome is unintentional. It arises because few teachers or curriculum developers are aware that most children come to school with their own well developed concept of God which reflects their lived experience of God. The spiritual education of children who already possess concept and experiences of God, follow different lines from the spiritual education of children who are *tabular rasa*. Unfortunately, the metaphor of children being empty slate waiting to be written upon seems to be the chief metaphor guiding religious education, at least as far as these children's experiences are concerned. This needs not to be the case because as Rizzuto(1979) rightly points out, children come to school with their own private God tucked under their arms.

Finally, with regards the 10 to 11 and above year group, the findings confirmed a study conducted by Schweitzer (1991), which concluded that there are diversity of views adolescent have on religion ranging from unexamined adherence to critical refusal to highly emotional commitment to open indifference. This indicates that many children whose ages fall within this range has a deep, complex matured spirituality build up of their experiences of God, their theologizing about God and the everyday lives they live in the light of these. The school, therefore, serves as a place where childhood theological reflection is stifled, ignored or neglected. In the light of this, there is the need for the teacher to transfer the truth and the right answers to spiritual education to young pupils instead of only dwelling on only the creed and ignoring the spiritual aspect.



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