Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment: Evidence & Impact

Edited By

Beverly J. Christian & Peter W. Kilgour

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Chapter Three

"In Green Pastures"

The Impact of One School's Gardening Program on Children's Perceptions of God and Jesus

Beverly J. Christian, Sandra Ludlow & Karyn A. Cameron
Avondale University

Abstract

This chapter explores the metaphor of Christian educators as under-shepherds who both protect and nurture their students. Using current research, it identifies how learning in a garden setting nurtures students' physical, intellectual, and social-emotional wellbeing. Although spiritual benefits of outdoor learning are alluded to in the literature, there is limited empirical evidence to support a link between outdoor learning environments and spiritual questing. Based on responses gathered from students in a Christian primary school, this chapter presents a case study of how one school garden program helped shape children's perceptions of God and Jesus as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

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Introduction

In John chapter 10, Jesus uses a sustained metaphor drawn from the shepherd and his flock to explain truths about the purpose of His life and ministry. One part of this metaphor is found in verse ten,

where Jesus explains His mission in terms of a shepherd's care of his flock and juxtaposes it against those who may seek to steal or injure his sheep. It is clear from reading this passage that the shepherd's role is one of a protector and provider:

> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (*New Revised Standard Version* [NRSV], 1989, John 10:10–11)

This chapter carries the shepherd metaphor into the context of Christian education. While Bible commentators agree that the shepherd represents Jesus Christ, this chapter takes the metaphor one step further to portray students as the "sheep" under the care of Christian educators. Christian educators assume the role of under-shepherds tasked with protecting and nurturing their students towards an abundant life as they reveal Jesus through their daily actions and words.

Sheep require protection. In biblical times, a sheepfold was offered for night-time safety. Additionally, shepherds carried a sling and staff to protect the sheep from marauding lions or bears. However, sheep need more than protection. They need nurture. They need green pastures and still waters (Psalm 23:2), things they may not stumble across if left alone. Likewise, students need both protection and nurture so they can enjoy the abundant life of which Jesus is speaking.

The abundant life spoken of here is more than a life free from cares and worries, more than physical or even emotional and mental wellbeing. While it is crucial to protect against the theft of holistic wellbeing, John 10:10 proposes an abundant life. Abundance is not merely the absence of that which would harm; it is the antithesis of that which would harm. The abundant life begins with the story of salvation that saves us from the penalty of sin (Romans 6:23) and fosters a relationship with a loving Saviour (John 17:3). It opens possibilities to spiritual knowledge and growth for those who accept God's actions of love (Galatians 5:22–23). Salvation is a deal that offers abundant living without strings attached. As under-shepherds, one purpose of Christian educators is clear. It is to help their students flourish and to connect them with the true Shepherd. One proposed way to achieve this is through regular exposure to the green spaces of the natural world.

The Abundant Benefits of School Garden Programs

Linked closely to the idea of flourishing and living an abundant life is the notion of wellbeing. There is a growing trend in education to focus on student wellbeing, although this has not always been the case. Until recently, the ideas of wellbeing and education appeared mutually exclusive, with education focusing primarily on subject knowledge and skills, leaving wellbeing as the responsibility of families and society (Cassidy, 2017). This perception of roles has changed. The current understanding of wellbeing is holistic and involves mental, physical, intellectual, social, and emotional wellness (Clement, 2010). Cassidy (2017) posits that these aspects of wellbeing "are grounded in the likes of relationships, community, respect, agency, autonomy, happiness, satisfaction, and being valued" (p. 17).

One approach to addressing wellbeing issues in schools has come from advocates of outdoor education. David Thoreau, Martin Luther, Wilbur Jackman (Kass, 2014), and visionary writer Ellen White were all early advocates for the inclusion of nature study in educational programs. White (1913), whose thoughts on Christian education have had a profound impact on the Adventist education system worldwide, wrote extensively about "the book of nature" (p. 185). She placed it second only to the Bible as a source of knowledge about God and emphasised a range of spiritual and wellbeing advantages for students who spend time learning and working outdoors. Current evidence, including that of the Forest School movement (Warden, 2015), supports White's stance that time spent outdoors is beneficial to children (Hanscom, 2016; Louv, 2009; Sampson, 2016; Warden, 2015).

With the shift to incorporate outdoor learning into their programs, schools have been engaging in learning activities that step outside the traditional classroom boundaries into the green spaces beyond. As under-shepherds, Christian educators feel the need to nurture their students. As the shepherd seeks out green pastures for the sheep, educators may seek to offer learning environments that nurture students' wellbeing. Increasingly, this involves green spaces, where children are immersed in natural environments. Outdoor learning takes various forms, one of which is to engage children in outdoor gardening activities. Research is growing on the benefits of school gardening programs (Passy, 2014). Beery et al. (2014) state, "When

gardens are designed in a way that mimics natural processes and children are allowed to engage with them in positive ways, gardens can help to promote children's physical, mental, and emotional health" (p. 290).

The second role of the shepherd is to protect. Our increasingly complex society constantly threatens children's and adolescents' innocence, wellbeing, and safety. These threats appear in many forms, including deteriorating physical health, distracted intellectual focus, diminishing social wellbeing, declining mental health, and dwindling opportunities for spiritual questing (Hyde, 2008). This chapter offers a glimpse into the evidence indicating that school gardening programs may address threats to student wellbeing by providing learning environments that nurture students.

Despite increased knowledge about child and adolescent health and better parental education, the physical health of children continues to deteriorate, with obesity, poor cardiovascular fitness, and lack of core body strength leading the concerns of the medical world (Hanscom, 2016). Although there is an increasing awareness of food choices for healthy living, eating habits are not keeping pace with knowledge. Literature about school gardening programs offers ways to address these issues educationally and practically by engaging children in physical activity in the fresh air (Hermann et al., 2006; Ohly et al., 2016) and promoting healthy eating (Beery et al., 2013; Hermann et al., 2006). Physical activity helps manage obesity and develops balance, coordination, and strength (Stan, 2017). Hanscom (2016), a paediatric occupational therapist, puts forward a strong case for outdoor play that transfers to school gardens. Hanscom (2016) highlights the importance of promoting core strength and proprioception through outdoor activities. Pulling weeds, digging, and pushing wheelbarrows meet the criteria of building core strength. She also cites benefits to eyesight and hearing.

Also of concern is the intellectual capacity of children. Children in the twenty-first century constantly face distractions that impact their focus on learning. These distractions have their roots in three factors: their heavy use of technology for passive entertainment (Marsh et al., 2015; Washington, 2021); their lack of opportunities for focused engagement (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009); and limited opportunities for personal choice due to micro-management by adults in the

home, educational settings, and after-school activities (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). These phenomena leave children with limited opportunities to exercise choice, be creative, engage deeply in play and learning, and develop metacognitive habits of mind that foster intellectual focus. Although increasing the intellectual capacity of children is infrequently cited as a goal of school gardening programs, there is evidence that school gardens can focus a distracted mind. The calming environment of experiential learning in green spaces stimulates high levels of engagement, which provide purpose, relevance, and a real-life context for learning (Beery et al., 2014; McCarty et al., 2018; Selmer et al., 2016). Williams and Brown (2012) posit that "links between curiosity, wonder, and critical thinking abound in school garden settings," making them fertile ground for robust intellectual growth (p. 197). Further, Hanscom (2016) maintains that "the outdoors awakens and rejuvenates the mind and engages all the senses at once" (p. 3) without overstimulation, providing an ideal learning environment.

Although intellectual capacity may determine a child's propensity for learning, educators acknowledge that social-emotional wellbeing lays a foundation on which a child can function to their full intellectual potential. Mental health issues were once the domain of late adolescence and adulthood, but this phenomenon has been sliding down the age scale, impacting children as young as four years of age (Gudmundsen et al., 2019). One extensive study conducted across eight European countries found that 22% of children aged 6–11 years self-reported some type of mental health issue (Husky et al., 2018). At school, mental health issues present as behaviours ranging from sadness to lack of concentration, fatigue, frustration, and anger (Dolton et al., 2020; Gudmundsen et al., 2019). The causes of poor mental health vary and include social media, where body image expectations and cyber-bullying take a toll on mental wellbeing (Kelly et al., 2018). In a recent investigation, Oswald et al. (2020) discovered that extensive screen time has a detrimental effect on the mental wellbeing of children and adolescents. The same study compared screen time and green time and found that green time, or exposure to the natural world, protected the mental wellbeing of the same age group.

Investigations conducted on school gardening programs also offer ample evidence of the social benefits of gardening (Block et al., 2015; Williams & Brown, 2012). Dyg and Wistoft (2018) have found

that school gardens provide an environment where collaboration, problem-solving, and empathy lead to healthy self-esteem. Other studies concur and add the benefits of increased responsibility and developing perseverance in completing tasks (Cairns, 2017; Robinson & Zajicek, 2005).

The forces that undermine intellectual capacity (as stated earlier in this chapter) also act to undermine opportunities for children to experience the awe and wonder of God's creation, "consider the things of God with continued attention" (May, 2006, p. 45), and engage in discussions about the meaning and the purpose of life (De Souza & Hyde, 2007) and God's role in that life. Discussions of this nature are labelled spiritual questing (Hyde, 2018). They can result in a dynamic and emerging religiosity (Heland-Kurzak, 2014). Sadly, often forces exist in secularised Western societies that silence discussions about God, leaving children without the time or words to express their emergent awareness of the spiritual.

Contemporary Christian children's ministries are often loud, fast-paced media events designed to entertain children (Langdoc, 2013), during which children are talked at, rather than with (Stonehouse & May, 2010). These events fail to give children the time or space to encounter God's presence or experience His greatness (May, 2006). This results in little time or opportunity to engage in metacognitive thought, weave together the threads of their experiences, make new meaning (Hyde, 2010), and engage in value-sensing behaviours that manifest as respect for self and others and a moral sensitivity to the meaning and purpose of life (Grajczonek, n.d.; Hay & Nye, 2006).

Spiritual questing is just one aspect of spiritual awareness that is pivotal in helping children come to know God and His role in their lives. Other aspects of the journey towards spiritual awareness and faith formation include the notion of a "felt sense" (Hyde, 2008) of something bigger and beyond concrete experiences. It also offers opportunities to use language, play, and art to tease out and wonder at and about experiences (Glăveanu, 2020) to shape an understanding of the spiritual (De Souza & Hyde, 2007; Hay & Nye, 2006; Mata-McMahon, 2016). Focused time, reflective practices, and respect for children's wondering and meaning making are practices that can be used by educators to scaffold children's emergent spiritual awareness and faith formation. Kolb's learning cycle (1984) is one approach that

may support this process: concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

Experiences in the natural world have the potential to act as provocations for Kolb's learning cycle, resulting in a felt sense of God's presence and His creative and sustaining greatness. The frequency of opportunities for revisiting natural places gives children the space and time to notice (awareness sensing) (Hay & Nye, 2006) and time to look for answers about the meaning of life and God's role in that life (value sensing). The initial awareness may be a fleeting moment but given time, repetition, and opportunities to wonder, scaffolded by sensitive adults, these glimpses often germinate into a deeper understanding of God and a desire to develop a relationship with Him (Stonehouse, 1998). However, evidence of how this process occurs is scant.

One limiting factor to research may be the challenge of defining children's spirituality (Adams et al., 2016; Fisher, 2015; Schein, 2018). Definitions of children's spirituality are elusive and primarily limited to broad definitions that consist of a general sense of awe and wonder or "an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding" (Miller, 2015, p. 28). Barrett (2012) posits that young children look for the designer of the natural world, but he stops short of defining spirituality. The challenge of agreeing on a definition may help to explain why research reflecting the role that outdoor experiences play in spirituality is essentially either theoretical or based on observation within a loosely structured framework. The need for further scholarly research has been widely acknowledged (Boyatzis, 2009; Christian, 2020; Heintzman, 2009; Miller, 2015, Ubani & Mutonen, 2018).

Adopting a more focused definition of spirituality within a Christian worldview, White viewed nature as a context for learning about God and learning to know God. She elaborated that "Nature is full of lessons of the love of God. Rightly understood, these lessons lead to the Creator. They point from nature to nature's God, teaching those simple, holy truths that cleanse the mind and bring it into close touch with God" (White, 1913, p. 188). She also believed in God as the Sustainer. She wrote, "The same creative energy that brought the world into existence is still exerted in upholding the universe and continuing the operations of nature" (White, 1913, p. 185). White

continues this line of thought with the statement, "The whole natural world is designed to be an interpreter of the things of God" (White, 1913, p. 186).

Noting the paucity of current evidence to support the notion of school gardens as a catalyst for developing children's spirituality and their relationship with God, this chapter aims to extend knowledge around the nature and spirituality nexus. It attempts this by exploring children's emerging perceptions and knowledge of God during one school's gardening program.

Context of the Investigation

A qualitative approach that recognises the importance of understanding children's perceptions in a real-world context was chosen for this investigation (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2018). The site for this case study was a three-classroom Seventh-day Adventist primary school in Australia. All children engaged in weekly gardening activities in an outdoor garden space. The data for this chapter was drawn from six focus groups with children ranging from kindergarten to grade six, with a total of 24 children participating.

After identifying that focus groups fit the purpose of this investigation (Breen, 2006), the researchers conducted four semi-structured focus groups across all grades. The initial focus groups explored several aspects of the gardening program, including connections to God and/or Jesus (hereafter God/Jesus). At a later stage, two more focus groups explored the God/Jesus and garden nexus in more depth, building on emerging themes from the first round of focus groups. Audio recordings were transcribed and memoed to identify any text related to spirituality in general and the children's perceptions of God/Jesus in particular. Line-by-line coding was then applied to extract categories and themes from the data (Charmaz, 2014).

The words God and Jesus are used interchangeably in this chapter. This is consistent with how the students used them. Students used the word God 49 times and the word Jesus 11 times. God was the word most used when speaking of creation, while Jesus was used when speaking about His death and resurrection. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the Word (Jesus) and God are presented as one (John 1:1). As the differentiation of the names of God was not crucial to the outcome of the investigation, both names have been used with the more frequent term, God, appearing first.

Student Responses

Initially, the researchers wanted to discover how the children related to the gardening program and identify its culture. Children were asked the question, "How do you feel when you are in the garden?" All except one gave a positive response, with several providing more than one feeling. The exception was the child who responded, *"I don't see how it can change my emotions."* Figure 3.1 provides a visual analysis of the responses. Fifteen children responded with the word "*excited,*" five children felt "*calm*" in the garden, five felt "*happy,*" and another three thought it was "*fun.*" The adverb *"really,"* as in *"really excited,"* was used several times. Other words to describe feelings were *"enthusiastic," "super," "great," "incredible,"* and *"delightful."*

Four of the words in Figure 3.1 have negative connotations (stress, stressed, sad, and pressure). In context, a clearer picture of how these words were used emerges: "*I'm never stressed or sad*" and "*I feel happy that we are outside without getting pressure,*" although one child offered that he experienced stress if other children were not doing the right thing. Two children explained their feelings in the garden through a simile and a metaphor, with one child stating, "*It makes me feel like I'm in heaven*" and another saying, "*I'm just sitting on a rainbow when I go to the garden.*" This analysis allowed the researchers to conjecture that the positive emotions engendered in the gardening environment created an environment conducive to exploring spirituality.

Figure 3.1: Students' Attitudes Towards the School Gardening Program



Having established that the children had a positive connection with the garden, the subsequent analysis phase was to explore their perceptions of God/Jesus and discover if and how the gardening activities assisted in building their perceptions.

The second phase of data analysis involved coding to facilitate the emergence of themes. Three distinct themes emerged: God/Jesus as the Creator, God/Jesus as the Sustainer, and God/Jesus as the Redeemer. Each of these themes is presented individually from the children's perspectives and discussed in the context of the literature on children's spirituality. Across all age groups, perceptions of God/Jesus emerged from the data in response to general questions about the gardening program. Younger children made more unsolicited comments about God/Jesus when speaking broadly about the school gardening program. These comments indicate that some children directly connected their gardening program and God/Jesus without the facilitator asking intentional questions about God. All participating children directly linked God/Jesus to their school's gardening program when asked intentional questions such as, "How do you see God in your school garden?"

Revealing Jesus as the Creator

The theme of Jesus as the Creator God was the strongest theme to emerge from the data and was evident across all age groups. A total of 25 responses about creation emerged to make up this theme. Eleven references applied to creation in a general way. One child expressed enjoyment of "*being out in nature because that's His creation."* Another child commented that *"being at His creation, you're learning about God."* Three more comments referred to the creation of plants, suggesting a sense of awe about the diversity of plants. Seven comments elaborated on various aspects of animal life and the responsibility of humans to protect the creatures found in the garden. One child acknowledged the role of the daddy longlegs spiders. Three children from different focus groups elaborated on different aspects of God's creative power, as seen in the monarch butterflies during gardening sessions. One child said, *"I have learnt about God because it's amazing to think of, like all the butterflies we learnt about."* Another child took up this idea and elaborated on the design aspects of butterflies, commenting, *"Just their patterns and the*

vibrant colours and…how they are so resilient when you think about it." The same child felt that the butterflies reminded her that Jesus:

> *… can change anything, like how a caterpillar, a very slow caterpillar that just crawls along a leaf and eats and eats and eats, goes into this chrysalis and then changes completely. It's like it's gone for a minute, and then it starts rebuilding itself just in a different form . . . and then it's just like it comes out, and it's totally different because it can now fly very fast; it has wings. It's a totally different shape.*

This child's comment was full of a felt sense of awe and wonder. When asked about something amazing they had seen growing in the garden, a third child responded with *"Our monarch butterflies . . . they were just everywhere."* The children had cultivated host plants for the monarch caterpillars and observed their life cycle changes while in the school garden, and it was clear this had impacted some children's perceptions of God.

Researchers sat with the children and asked open questions. The children were invited to speak, and the researchers listened with respect, allowing the children's "spiritual voices to be heard" (Robinson, 2019, p. 341).

The provocation for children to experience God as Creator appeared to be inherent in this garden environment (Christian, 2018). As this was a Christian school, the theme of respect for and enjoyment of God's creation was anticipated and aligns well with Barrett's (2012) argument that children are "born believers" who search for the designer in the natural world (p. 3). The experiences the children had – observing, exploring, touching, creating, protecting, and caring in the garden – worked in synchronicity with the school's faith environment and the knowledge of God received from parents and significant others to provide a rich opportunity to encounter God as Creator (Heland-Kurzak, 2019).

Responses to time in the garden included joy, awe, wonder, and a felt sense of something bigger than what they could see or touch (Hyde, 2010). Spiritual questing (Hyde, 2008) led to the epiphany that "*Jesus can change anything,*" adding a wonder-filled nuance to the children's emerging perspective of God/Jesus. Being in nature and *"learning about God"* resonates with several statements from White,

including, "The things of nature are the Lord's silent ministers, given to us to teach us spiritual truths. They speak to us of the love of God and declare the wisdom of the great Master Artist" (White, 1952, p. 147). She also states, "Next to the Bible, nature is to be our great lesson book" (White, 1954, p. 146). This lesson book allows children to be, to see, to touch, to explore, to do, and to notice a world of increasing mystery and wonder, over and over again (Tolbert, 2014). It allows a slow pace and invites reflection (May & Ratcliff, 2004), offering space for children to encounter God and develop an understanding of His role in their lives.

Cavalletti et al. (1992) suggest that the educator has the task "to offer the child's wonder an object capable of taking the child always farther and deeper into the awareness of reality, an object whose frontiers are always expanding as the child slowly proceeds in the contemplation of it" (p. 140). The results of this study suggest that a garden can be that "object" and provoke such wonder – as the children experience and participate in an expanding awareness of the realities, mystery, and wonders of the natural world. Connecting with nature and its beauty, transformative life cycles, seasons, diversity, and living creatures close enough to touch and observe over time also connected these students with the Creator (Christian, 2018). Christian educators added value through the design of the garden for diversity and interest, encouraging butterflies and insects. They also facilitated ongoing opportunities for the children to immerse themselves in this environment and wonder, providing the time and space for the children to catch a glimpse of God/Jesus as Creator (Christian, 2018; Stonehouse, 1998).

Revealing Jesus as the Sustainer

The second theme to emerge from the data was the perception that children had of God/Jesus as the Sustainer. Although this word was not used frequently by the children, the concept was identified and closely linked to the idea of caring for God's/Jesus' creation. One child expressed her understanding of God's/Jesus' sustaining power in terms of life cycles she had observed in the garden.

> *He [God/Jesus] keeps the cycle going. Like in a carrot, you eat the carrot in our garden like we do. We sometimes have big pieces of carrots because we harvest all the carrots. We eat them and then [the teacher] tells us, "Don't throw the tops in the bin. Leave*

> *a bit of space so we can regrow that top" because then we just plant it again and the carrot reforms. It just grows.*

Four children verbalised the importance of not killing garden creatures *"because it's God's creation." "We've learned about living things that, like, when we see creatures, little creatures, we just leave them alone, and we don't destroy their own houses."*

There was an emerging sense of responsibility, which a child expressed as an outcome of learning about God in the "Nest" (outdoor classroom). *"We have to learn to appreciate His nature and work on it. And if we don't look after it, there's going to be nothing for us left and then we could eventually [end] up dying; then we wouldn't be sustainable."* Fewer children commented on God/Jesus as Sustainer than as Creator, although students generally indicated their agreement with the statements made by their classmates on this topic.

This second theme indicated that the children in this study connected the concept of God/Jesus as Creator with a complementary role as the Sustainer of Creation, an active ongoing role in their universe and one that the children had the opportunity to observe and participate in. The ongoing nature of the garden program allowed students to experience cycles of life, such as seasonal planting, metamorphosis, and harvests, over the course of time with the continued attention that May (2006) posited as important in supporting children to encounter God through awe and wonder. Their involvement resonated with Kolb's learning cycle (1984) by beginning with concrete experiences, having ongoing opportunities for scaffolded reflection that evokes spiritual questing, and, finally, actively experimenting with ideas as they wondered aloud and expressed their sense of meaning and values in both words and actions (May & Ratcliff, 2004).

The children saw the cycles of life, with plants and insects, and they entered the mystery of a God who keeps these cycles going. The responses and general agreement among the children indicated value-sensing (Hay & Nye, 2006; May & Ratcliff, 2004) as they showed an awareness of their own responsibility as protectors and sustainers in their garden world, placing them in partnership with God/Jesus. The use of gardens to foster stewardship is noted by Cairns (2017) in terms of the positive impact the students can have on their community now and in the future. In this instance, an additional concept has emerged. The children indicated developing a sense of responsibility for the

earth within the construct of a relationship with the God who created all and who sustains life on earth.

It is important to notice the reference to adults in this questing. "*We've learned about living things . . .*" Adults have facilitated ongoing wonder as they have added knowledge and awareness of living things in the garden. This knowledge has opened the doors to greater awareness and more wonder and awe, along with a sense of protection and care for the living things in their world. However, it is the children who "weave the threads together" (Stonehouse & May, 2010, p. 27) and catch a glimmer of God as they discover their relationship with the natural world (Nye, 2006).

Revealing Jesus as Our Redeemer

The theme of God/Jesus as our Redeemer surfaced in the general questions about the gardening program. Four children commented on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross during the initial focus groups. One child felt that thinking about creation was a reminder of *"Him dying on the cross for us."* This comment and others were general statements, although one child gave a specific example and related it to the harvesting of a potato bush, commenting, ". . . *you've got to wait till it dies and then you've got to pick it."* The child took this observation and then related it to Jesus who *". . . came to live on earth and He came to die for us, but He rose, and He's gone back to heaven."*

The second round of focus groups used more intentional questions to explore this theme on a deeper level. Building on the comments of children that related directly to the death of Christ, the children were asked if they could think of anything in the garden that reminded them of Jesus' sacrifice and His great love, how he died and rose again. One child offered the idea of *". . . how some plants die, and then other plants grow on them,"* showing how new life came out of death. This idea was immediately picked up by another child, who added, *"If a tree dies in the wild, then it gives life again and you see just in a couple of days, moss is starting to grow all over and maybe another tree is sprouting out from it."*

The theme of new life emerging from death was carried over into other garden plants the children had observed, including bean and rosella plants, a type of native hibiscus with edible calyxes. One child pointed out that although they look dead, bean seeds are not

dead *". . . because you add water; they can still expand, and they can regrow."* Another child, in describing rosella seeds, stated with a sense of authority, "*When they get old, the rosellas die 'cause it's not the right season, and then where the fruit was, there's a little seed pod, and then out of that seed pod comes some tiny, dried-out seed with the dried-out seed pod and then they can stay for, like, ten years and [if] you plant them, they still will grow."*

The concepts of sacrificial death and resurrection are not easy to explain to children. Concepts are developed through the senses and find expression in language, and although children observe death in their world, resurrection is an abstract concept that is limited to fantasy movies and fictional stories as well as stories found in the Bible. Despite this, the children in this investigation were able to provide examples of how something that gives up its life could re-emerge in a new form. For these children, garden experiences provided opportunities to wonder at what they observed (Glăveanu, 2020), offering object lessons from nature that were rich with visual imagery. The children's responses indicated that they were picking up the threads of their experiences in the garden, using examples of potatoes, seeds, and trees to make new meaning and shape their understanding of the biblical narrative (De Souza & Hyde, 2007; Hay & Nye, 2006).

In this case-study Christian school, it is likely that the children were pre-disposed to believing in the idea of sacrificial death from Bible stories, especially those about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Whether these children had already accepted these stories and had woven them into their own emerging spirituality is unknown. However, the focus group leaders facilitated this process through listening as the children shaped their concepts into words. This investigation highlights the role that perceptive adults can play in scaffolding spirituality using, for example, Kolb's learning cycle (1984). The garden environment, in this case, provided the concrete experiences. The responses of the children were evidence that reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation were taking place.

While the garden program offered opportunities for educators to join children in spiritual questing (Hyde, 2018), this study did not establish the extent to which this was happening. However, we do acknowledge

the crucial role that adults play by taking time to pause and reflect with children on natural object lessons that are metaphorical of the death and resurrection phenomenon and listening as children express their understanding through meaningful and ongoing observations. Without ongoing observation, children do not see the dead tree giving new life, the dry seeds sprouting after rain, or the potato plant's journey from seed potato through growth to death and the harvest of new potatoes. For the children in this investigation, the metaphors of nature enabled either powerful discovery or confirmation of a concept that is at the heart of Christianity.

Conclusion

As under-shepherds, Christian educators carry a responsibility to protect and nurture their students. When Jesus told the parable of the Good Shepherd, his listeners would have filled in many details from the traditions and cultural understandings inherent in Psalm 23. Verses one and two resonate with the findings of this study. "The Lord is my shepherd . . . He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters . . ." (Psalm 23:1, 2). Christian educators can lead their students to green pastures and still waters, "for His name's sake . . ." (Psalm 23:3), bringing safety and comfort, abundance and joy, and goodness and mercy as the children get to know the Good Shepherd for themselves.

Traditionally, a shepherd would lead his flock out of harm's way to a green pasture – a space where the sheep could be safely nourished. This was a daily rhythm of life for the sheep and the shepherd. Similarly, this study shows the value of regular visits to the school garden – a "green space" of intentional natural diversity, including plants and living creatures. These green spaces offered opportunities for the children to experience wonder, awe, and joy, deepening a felt sense that led to spiritual questing. Just as the sheep know the Shepherd's voice, so too, it seems, do children sense the Good Shepherd in the green spaces of the natural world.

As the Psalm continues, the Shepherd also leads the sheep beside still waters to refresh and restore them. Traditional understanding adds richness to this picture, as the shepherd barricades areas within the busily bubbling brook to create pools of still water from which the sheep can safely drink. Children in this study recognised His voice by sensing God/Jesus as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

This chapter has unlocked an ecological understanding of the use of the shepherd metaphor and has provided deeper insights into the way Christian educators can nurture and protect the emerging spiritual awareness of children. There is potential for Christian educators to partner with children to deepen children's spirituality through shared spiritual questing, listening to the children's spiritual voices, and being mindful of the Good Shepherd with the children. The educator can model a heightened awareness and expectation of hearing the Shepherd's voice. In these green relational spaces, under-shepherds may also offer opportunities for the children to partner with their Shepherd in acts of responsibility and stewardship, encouraging value-sensing.

Similarly, the Christian educator can intentionally set apart time from the fast pace of the school day to allow for reflection and time to simply "be" with the Good Shepherd. These "still waters" of reflection open up possibilities for spiritual nourishment and growth. This study has highlighted the opportunities for creating an unhurried rhythm of reflection within a garden setting. Regular reflection facilitates spiritual questing in relational spaces with other children and sensitive adults.

Revisiting and reframing experiences by questioning, deep listening, and co-constructing ideas about God creates opportunities for children to encounter God in a personal way. It is the under-shepherd who creates the unhurried rhythm of reflection that allows the lambs to flourish. Children can play, grow, and spiritually quest in the innocence and openness of childhood when led to the still waters of reflection within a natural setting.

The findings of this study have shed light on one context in which Christian Educators can emulate the role of the under-shepherd, leading students to a green space and on to the still waters of spiritual questing. The green space and still waters of the school garden, in this case study, revealed three different facets of God/Jesus to the children. Not only was God/Jesus revealed, but the researchers found that the garden impacted the children's emerging perception of God/Jesus through the awe and wonder they experienced when tending their garden.

We, the researchers, encourage all Christian educators who have set up or are thinking of setting up a gardening program at their school to

look beyond the traditional key learning areas as well as the wellbeing and nature pedagogy outcomes and expand their thinking to include a higher purpose. Evidence from the children's voices in this study confirms the impact of a caring under-shepherd, green pastures, and still waters in providing an environment conducive to revealing God/Jesus.

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