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## God's Word, Students, and Christian Classrooms: The Why and How

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*Chapter One***God’s Word, Students, and Christian Classrooms:***The Why and How***Barbara J. Fisher & Merle E. Cozens***Avondale University***Abstract**

With ready access to God’s Word, it is challenging and disturbing to read research declaring “that only two in ten Aussie Christians read their Bible daily” (Hughes and Pickering, 2010, para. 1) and see census data showing that Christianity is declining in the community, especially among 18-25-year-olds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Blair (2016) contends that our culture has become biblically illiterate, lacking basic biblical knowledge. Because Christian education is predicated on God’s Word, Christian schools are in a unique position to contribute to efforts to reverse the current trend of biblical illiteracy. In this chapter, we define biblical literacy and discuss why it is important in contemporary Australian society. We then outline why biblical literacy is such an important aspect of a student’s education in a Christian classroom and consider how Christian teachers can be positively engaged in this journey and quest with their students. Finally, we describe practical ideas, scenarios, and examples of biblical literacy programs currently available in Australia and the South Pacific region.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Introduction

God's Word, according to Christians, is a collection of 66 ancient handwritten manuscripts called the 'Holy Scriptures,' originally recorded on scrolls of papyrus or leather in mainly Hebrew and Greek. However, in recent decades, these sacred manuscripts have been translated into modern languages, including English, Spanish, French and many others. The Guinness World Records (2021) state that God's Word, or the Bible, is "the best-selling book of all time," having sold "between 5 and 7 billion copies" (para. 1).

History is replete with stories of people who suffered or were punished by death because they chose to translate, read, own, carry, or tell someone about God's Word, the Bible. Contemporary Christianity is indebted to the many martyrs who willingly sacrificed their lives to make the printed Bible available to everyone. Twenty-first-century Christians have more access to God's Word than at any other time in history. It is available anywhere and anytime via digital technology (iPad, iPhones, Bible Apps, computers, audio) and the traditional printed copy.

With this ready availability and access to God's Word, it is challenging and disturbing to see research such as Hughes and Pickering's (2010) declaring "that only two in ten Aussie Christians read their Bible daily" (para. 1) and Hughes' (2021) comment that there "is widespread skepticism about the value of the Bible" (para. 14). The figures could be even more confronting if the research was repeated now. According to Blair (2016), "Because the Bible isn't read routinely by many in our society, we've lost that knowledge of it that was once considered a given" (para. 3). Blair (2016) also contends that because of a lack of basic biblical knowledge, our "culture has become biblically illiterate" (para. 4). Jenkins (2021), however, commenting on current biblical illiteracy statistics, had the following caution for all Christians: "Don't settle for being a statistic, and don't get discouraged by the statistics of biblical illiteracy" (para. 9), but instead become a biblically literate Christian and reverse the trend of biblical illiteracy.

With a noticeably declining interest in Bible reading and study among Christians, several articles within the last fifteen years have highlighted the declining biblical literacy rate within the Australian

Christian community (Bible Society, n.d.; Clarke, 2008; Lake, 2018; Jackson, 2021; Rochow, 2017). Some of these articles describe creative and innovative programs that Christians can implement and participate in if they want a daily and personal encounter with God and His Word. Because Christian education is predicated on God's Word, Christian schools are in a unique position to contribute to efforts to reverse the current trend of biblical illiteracy and become a counter-cultural witness to the world. If biblical illiteracy continues unchallenged, our students will be left without an authentic Christian foundation on which to build their essential Christian values, biblical truths, and worldview. Therefore, in this chapter, we: (1) define biblical literacy; (2) discuss why biblical literacy is important in contemporary Australian society; (3) outline why biblical literacy is considered to be such an important aspect of a student's education in a Christian classroom; (4) consider how Christian teachers can be positively engaged in this journey and quest with their students; and (5) describe practical ideas, scenarios, and examples of biblical literacy programs currently available in Australia and the South Pacific region.

### **What is Biblical Literacy?**

Engle (2022) points out that biblical literacy and Bible study differ, contending that while they overlap, they have different purposes. According to Engle (2022), Bible study involves an in-depth study and exegesis of a text or chapter. Biblical literacy, however, involves the capacity to read and understand the Bible's grand metanarrative and what the Bible is saying while simultaneously having the ability to discerningly apply it to life.

Biblical literacy can be defined as "the ability to rightly read and understand the Bible, using the proper tools of study, thereby becoming well acquainted with the Bible's character (innate qualities) and content" (Nelson, 2011, para. 3). Biblical literacy means more than just acquiring knowledge. Kimmel (2021) comments that students need to know more than just "the books of the Bible but understand what they are saying and, most importantly, how what God is saying applies to their lives" (p. 5). Thus, biblical literacy "is not just facts and the ability to recall them, but the ability to use them to create meaning: about life, about God, about the world, and my place in all of it" (Blair, 2016, para. 11). Further, Hudson (2018) reminds the

reader that the Bible is God's revealed Word, "but it must always be interpreted through the lenses of Jesus and love. God's word was never intended to insult, demean, oppress, exclude, belittle or attack" (para. 16-17). Engle (2022) points out that the primary purpose of biblical literacy is to help "people understand the gospel, know their Creator, discover why they exist and need a Savior—and why it's important to disciple others toward understanding these truths" (para. 19).

## **Why is Biblical Literacy Important in Contemporary Australian Society?**

We contend that there are a variety of reasons that biblical literacy is important in Australia's secular and unchurched society.

### **Biblical Literacy Can Support a Person's Search for Meaning and Purpose in Life**

For some people, the Bible is outdated and no longer relevant in the twenty-first-century. For others, it is immaterial that the Bible was written many centuries ago because the message remains relevant. God's Word is regarded as a timeless love letter from God to His children.

In a world increasingly expressing fear of the future and experiencing deepening hopelessness, the Bible can offer its readers hope, forgiveness, a new start, and purpose in life. Ryle claimed, in 1878, that biblical literacy teaches people "what to believe, what to be, and what to do; how to live with comfort, and how to die in peace" (p. 84) and it is the same in the twenty-first-century. Biblical literacy still offers students a purpose and direction in life despite living in an uncertain secular world. Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), 16th President of the United States of America, said, "This great book is the best gift God has given to man... [Without] it we could not know right from wrong" (Leidner, 2022, para. 17).

Stetzer (2022) reminds educators that Bible reading does not make a Christian, "but it helps us to grow as one" (para. 3). The Bible is central to a Christian's daily faith formation and experience. It informs our understanding of who we are and who God is (Peterson, 2003). According to Heb. 4:12 (*New International Version* [NIV], 1973/2011), "the word of God is alive and active." Reynolds (2003)

states that when we engage with God's word, we can look into the heart of God. Age or intellectual ability is inconsequential, according to Dewey (2001), because "the simplest soul and the youngest child, if they are open to God, can get as much as anyone else from reading the Bible" (p. 7). White (1943) adds that it is the great lesson book, and students should have access to its pages so that they can learn to know God. Peterson (2003) argues, "It is not a difficult book that only 'smart' people can get" (p. 13).

### **Biblical Literacy Provides the Basis for Developing a Christian Worldview**

Jackson (2021) believes that biblical literacy can aid students in their quest to answer life's philosophical questions of "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here?" (para. 8). Consider this student's experience:

At the end of Scripture class in a government school, a shy child quietly asked her Scripture teacher, "Miss Susan (not her real name) do you think God really made me on purpose and thinks I'm special, 'cause my parents told me I was a mistake!" (South Lakes Christian Education Association, 2022, p. 2)

This student gained a new and positive perspective on life after learning about the loving God of the Bible. Engle (2022) similarly argues that biblical literacy can answer life's most vital questions: Who is God? Who am I? Why do I need Jesus? As students answer these profound questions and develop their worldview, the Bible, rather than a collection of curious stories, becomes God's metanarrative, or overarching 'Big Story,' that can aid students as they formulate their answers.

A worldview is more than a personal feeling because it informs and defines a person. It can provide a sense of commonality, purpose, and direction in life, outline cherished and venerated values, inform decision-making, and recommend standards of conduct. Each person has a worldview, even if they are unaware of it or cannot articulate it. Its formation may be unconscious or conscious. Biblical literacy, therefore, can provide indispensable positive guidance and direction. As Francis (2000) concluded, "Bible reading makes a small but unique contribution to promoting a sense of purpose in life among [13-15-year-olds]" (p. 1).

In contemporary society, including popular culture, the prevailing values and ideals vying for allegiance posit often conflicting worldviews. With visual and print media as the dominant purveyors of societal ideals, standards, and values, it is essential that students have a conscious awareness of biblical literacy and its values, beliefs, and attitudes to prevent erroneous ideas and opinions from imperceptibly shaping their worldview.

Walsh and Middleton (1984, p. 35) suggest that a person's faith commitment and worldview can be discovered by answering four fundamental questions that tap the core of any worldview:

1. Who am I? addresses the nature, meaning, and purpose of human existence.
2. Where am I? deals with the nature and extent of reality.
3. What is wrong? seeks an answer to the cause of suffering, evil, injustice, and disorder.
4. What is the remedy? explores ways of overcoming hindrances and obstacles to personal fulfillment.

### **Biblical Literacy Affords an Insight into World History**

Any quest to know God today can be informed by an understanding of the origins and the history of the Bible. According to Mullon (2015), all history is providential because "it revolves around the Lord Jesus Christ, His birth, His death, and His resurrection, which were actual historical events that changed the world and split history in two" (para. 1).

Long before writing and printing were invented, the first Bible stories were learned and passed on through oral tradition. Because they involved stories about God, storytellers treated the story with great respect. Each idea had to be repeated with accuracy and exactness so that its meaning would remain relevant to the listeners. With the invention of the written word and paper, scribes (or secretaries) carefully recorded these stories on scrolls of papyrus or leather, mainly in Hebrew or Greek.

Due to the loss of original manuscripts, the authenticity of Old Testament Hebrew writings was questioned by critics. However, in 1947, and with further discoveries up to 1956, new and convincing

evidence was uncovered about Old Testament writings in Hebrew. A shepherd boy accidentally discovered and unearthed manuscripts now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These manuscripts had remained securely hidden in pottery jars in a cave near the Dead Sea for around 2000 years and supported the veracity of the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts. Previously, critics had claimed that the Hittites never existed and that, therefore, the Bible could not be an accurate historical record. However, with the unearthing of evidence regarding the Hittites' capital city, Hattusha, and its people, Biblical history was verified as accurate and credible. The same was true for the ancient king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. Before the excavation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Nebuchadnezzar's name was found only in the Bible and one other insignificant record. Historians concluded that the Bible must therefore be incorrect. However, the excavated manuscripts supported the Bible as an accurate and credible record.

Throughout history, Bible narratives have influenced and motivated people around the world. For example, during World War I, a British Army Officer stationed in Palestine near a town called Michmash, Major Vivian Gilbert, remembered having read an Old Testament story that involved this ancient town. After searching for and reading the Bible story that mentioned Michmash, the British Army Officer altered his battle plan of attack. Here is his incredible story:

In the First World War, a brigade major in Allenby's army in Palestine was, on one occasion, searching his Bible with the light of a candle, looking for a particular name. His brigade had received orders to take a village that stood on a rocky prominence on the other side of a deep valley. It was called Michmash, and the name seemed somehow familiar. Eventually, he found it in 1 Samuel 13 and read there: "And Saul, and Jonathan his son, and the people that were present with them, abode in Gibeah of Benjamin but the Philistines encamped in Michmash." It then went on to tell how Jonathan and his armour-bearer crossed over during the night "to the Philistines' garrison" on the other side, and how they passed two sharp rocks: "there was a sharp rock on the one side, and a sharp rock on the other side: and the name of the one was Bozez and the name of the other Seneh." They clambered up the cliff and overpowered the garrison, "within as it were a half acre of land, which a yoke of oxen might plough." The main body of the enemy awakened by the melee thought they were surrounded by Saul's troops and "melted away and they went on beating down



one another.” Thereupon Saul attacked with his whole force and beat the enemy. “So the Lord saved Israel that day.”

The brigade major reflected that there must still be this narrow passage through the rocks, between two spurs, and at the end of it the “half acre of land.” He woke the commander and they read the passage through together once more. Patrols were sent out. They found the pass, which was thinly held by the Turks, and which led past two jagged rocks - obviously Bozez and Seneh. Up on top, beside Michmash, they could see by the light of the moon a small flat field. The brigadier altered his plan of attack. Instead of deploying the whole brigade he sent one company through the pass under cover of darkness. The few Turks whom they met were overpowered without a sound, the cliffs were scaled, and shortly before daybreak the company had taken up a position on “the half acre of land.”

The Turks woke up and took to their heels in disorder since they thought they were being surrounded by Allenby’s army. They were all killed or taken prisoner. And so, after thousands of years British troops successfully copied the tactics of Saul and Jonathan. (Keller, 1955, Chapter 18, para. 21-26)

### **Biblical Literacy Can Provide Helpful Insights into Australian History**

In nineteenth-century Australian history, the Bible “as a cultural force... was a central point of reference for Christians and atheists alike” (Whittaker, 2018, para. 18). The Bible was used as “the core text” (Whittaker, 2018, para. 7) by non-Christians and Christians alike to determine values, morals, and ethics. Interestingly, Whittaker (2018) further points out that convicts regarded their gaolers as Pharisees and “identified themselves as Jesus-like innocent victims” (para. 11). Mattiske (2018) reported that “Biblical texts were well-known by convicts” (para. 4) with many of them having the texts tattooed onto their bodies. Unsurprisingly, “some identified with biblical characters, many of whom were travellers and exiles, and the Bible’s proclamation of God’s love for the oppressed and outcast gave hope” (Mattiske, 2018, para. 4).

Lake’s (2018) thought-provoking work chronicled the influence of biblical literacy in Australian history, concluding that: “The Bible has been bound up with the Australian experience of colonialism. As such, a robust biblical literacy can aid understanding of the past and

contribute to [our] present day” (para 19). Lake (2018) further points out that:

1. “without a degree of biblical literacy” (para. 13), many Australian audiences will fail to fully appreciate an Australian author’s creative work (e.g., Patrick White, Elizabeth Jolley, and Tim Winton); and
2. “The Bible is a substantial - and unresolved - part of Australia’s European cultural baggage” (para. 14), especially in relation to colonisation and the experience of First Nations peoples.

### **Biblical Literacy Plays a Role in Contemporary Australian Society**

Whittaker (2018) asks, “How do we expect the next generation to navigate the complexities of the current world without robust, academic, religious education that includes Christian sources?” (para. 13). Lake (2018) describes the world as an “overwhelmingly religious place... with Christianity being the most practised faith” (para. 7). She contends that if we are to be influential global citizens, we need knowledge of its key text, the Bible (Lake, 2018). Similarly, Mattiske (2018) argues that “the rise of Christianity in Asia and the global south means biblical literacy will be part of the fabric of future Australian immigration” (para. 10).

### **Biblical Literacy Incorporates Personal Engagement and Interaction With God’s Word**

Jackson (2021) argues that “the most powerful and effective strategy in bringing the gospel to a lost world is for people to read the text for themselves” (para. 12). In other words, people need to be allowed “to read and question and engage with God firsthand” (Jackson, 2021, para. 15) through reading His word. According to Hughes and Pickering (2010), “one of the strongest markers of a spiritual life” (p. 43) is Bible reading, while Pollard (2020) contends that “the process of thinking about the Bible can take many forms, such as simple questioning, forming useful self-regulatory judgments, reflective skepticism, and moving thinking beyond human limitations by seeking God’s understanding and wisdom” (para. 2). Jackson (2021) points out, “that year nine to ten in high school mark the peak in the rate of commitments to Christ” because “the Bible’s earthly frankness and clarity is very attractive” (para. 9).

However, according to the 2021 Australian census, many young people have given up on their faith by the time they reach the age of 18 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). So, why do some maintain their faith at this age while most young people seem to be walking away? Young people who belong to a small Bible study group may retain their Christian faith when it is challenged because of the support they gain from being part of a like-minded group of Christians (O’Neel, 2019). However, further research is needed to determine key factors in young people maintaining their Christian faith.

Bradley (2019) reminds the Bible reader that the Bible is not “a special message to each of us independent of each other” (para. 14). Sadly, individual salvation “that’s only concerned with where we’re going when we die” (Bradley, 2019, para. 14), misses the overarching and encompassing universal biblical metanarrative. Specifically, the Bible, including both the Old and New Testaments, is about God forming a “community of people” from the earth’s four corners “that belong to him” (Bradley, 2019, para. 15). White (1955) notes that this means “every individual disciple of the Master is heaven’s appointed channel for the revelation of God to men” (p. 40).

### **Biblical Literacy Has Significantly Influenced the Arts Throughout History**

According to Lake (2018), the Bible has played a dynamic role in our creative culture, especially the foundation of the English language and literature. The influence of biblical literacy on literature, music, and art can be appreciated and experienced when a person reads Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, listens to Handel’s *Messiah*, visits the Sistine Chapel in Rome, or researches the origins of phrases such as “the salt of the earth” and “the powers that be.” The Bible’s influence can also be seen in contemporary popular culture, such as in musicals including *Joseph and the Amazing Technicoloured Dreamcoat*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, movies such as *The Passion of the Christ*, animated films such as *Prince of Egypt*, and books such as *The Da Vinci Code*. Celebrated Australian photographer, Ken Duncan (2022), commented that his philosophy is based on the Bible text found in Rom. 1:20 (NIV): “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Whittaker (2018) reminds teachers that “today, most Australian high school students will, at some point in their education, encounter Shakespeare, but not the Bible. This is despite the Bible’s cultural force and historic import arguably outweighing that of Shakespeare” (para. 17).

### **Biblical Illiteracy Can Lead To the Application of False and Misleading Biblical Concepts**

Bradley (2019) contends that some people read the Bible for confirmation rather than inspiration while Hudson (2018) argues that in times past, the Bible has been used inappropriately and erroneously due to scriptural ignorance and biblical illiteracy. Hudson (2018) further claims that in an “attempt to apply Scripture without considering its historical and cultural contexts” (para. 8), people have erroneously interpreted the Bible literally and this has led to injustices and atrocity, such as in the endorsement of slavery and racial discrimination. Thus, biblical interpretation has frequently been used in support of tyranny:

Such atrocities as the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, environmental exploitation, subjugation of women (including wife beating), and countless other acts of human barbarity were condoned by the church simply because someone in power interpreted a particular passage in the wrong way. (Wray, 2011, p. 3)

### **Why is Biblical Literacy an Important Part of Australian Christian Education?**

Biblical literacy, according to White (1952), is an integral part of Christian education because the reader is in touch “with the thoughts of the Infinite” (p. 124). It engages divine power and creates intellectual stimulation and increased energy levels. Even angels, it is suggested, are sent to impress the mind, and enlighten the understanding (White, 1943).

However, Lake (2018) provocatively claims that “biblical literacy is likely lower in Australia today than at any point since the convict era” (para. 1) based on research conducted in 2010 that showed “around 10% of Australian secondary students read the Bible weekly or more. A further 15 to 20% browsed it occasionally” (para. 3). Lake (2018) contrasted these findings with those from 1960 that showed

“nine in ten Australians had a Bible at home” (para. 2) and 38% of the research participants had read the Bible “within the previous two weeks” (para. 2). She concluded that “in less than two generations, the proportion of Australians who never pick up a Bible for themselves has leapt to seven out of ten” (Lake, 2018, para. 4). Is it possible that Christian education could provide a way to reverse this negative trend in Australian biblical literacy and, in the process, create a better society?

Hughes and Pickering (2010) suggest that Bible reading develops “a positive attitude towards helping others and to social justice” (p. 35) and an “involvement of people in voluntary activities in the community” (p. 36). They also comment that a young Bible-reading person tends “to take life a little more seriously than those who do not read the Bible as frequently” (p. 35). Kimmel (2021) further observes that “when students are equipped to go to use God’s Word, as God intended, students will follow Jesus long after their time in youth group is over” (p. 81).

Cole and Ovwigho (2012) discovered that adults and children who read the Bible at least four times a week engaged in less risk-taking behaviour and experienced fewer personal issues. This finding is consistent with White’s (1943) observation that a balanced lifestyle, character resilience, and truth discernment are the outcomes of Bible engagement. Hughes and Pickering’s (2010) research points out that, “while Bible reading may be more the product of valuing a ‘spiritual life’ than the cause of it, statistical analysis indicated that it was one of the strongest markers of a spiritual life: stronger than church attendance, a personal commitment to faith, and several other factors” (p. 35).

Evans (2017) summarised research by Ek (2008), Glanville et al., (2008), and Jeynes (2003, 2009, 2010), that found “a correlation between students who read the Bible and their academic achievement” (p. 1). Evans (2017) further reports that “students believe their Biblical literacy practices significantly influence their reading ability, behaviour, motivation, decision-making, and personal life” (p. 1). Jeynes’ (2009) reported similar findings that showed Bible study in the Christian classroom can provide students with intellectual and spiritual benefits. In Jeynes’ (2009) study “Those students high in Bible literacy had the best behavioral outcomes followed by those students medium

in Bible literacy, and trailed by those lowest in Bible literacy” (p. 6). Further, he also discovered that students with the highest biblical literacy also ranked highest in academic achievement and displayed the best behaviour among participant groups. Importantly, those with the lowest biblical literacy also had the lowest academic scores and worst behaviour of the three groups.

## **How Can We Teach Biblical Literacy in Christian Schools?**

A person's life is not changed by simply knowing the Scriptures but by having an intimate relationship with the author of the Scriptures. It was Hughes and Pickering's (2010) research that promoted the Bible Society (n.d.) to encourage “churches, Christian organisations, and Christian schools to be part of a nationwide push to encourage their members to grow their Bible habit” (para. 4). The Bible Society suggested that Christians read a Bible verse daily, think about it, and then share it with someone else. However, Stack-Nelson (2014), a Christian teacher, commented that “I've begun to worry that when students leave my class, they know more about the Bible, but they don't seem to be much better readers of the Bible” (p. 293). So how do teachers get young people to read the Bible?

According to Jackson (2021), “the worst thing we can do is to infect our audience [students] with the assumption that the Bible needs some kind of sugar coating” (para. 10). Jackson (2021) suggests that teachers instead need to “get out of the way and let the Word of God do its work” (para. 12), arguing that young people in the 21st century “don't find the Bible boring, and we shouldn't apologise in advance as if we expected them to” (para. 10). White (1952) suggests strategies and interactions for Bible teaching that effectively produce biblically literate students. In the next section, we outline practical ideas, scenarios, and examples that may assist teachers in engaging students in meaningful biblical literacy experiences and appropriate interactions.

### **Recognise the Value of Small Group Bible Study**

O'Neel (2019) reminds teachers that Jesus taught in small groups. Small groups have the potential to encourage everyone to take part and “allow every voice to be heard” (Featherby, 2020, para.

3). Palmer (2020) argues that the dynamics of a small group Bible study can provide participants with support, encouragement, a sense of belonging, and accountability. A study by Earls (2014) shows that small groups can impact students' lives because the "members feel closer to God (69 percent), understand the Bible better (74 percent), trust God more (66 percent), and become more loving in their relationships (48 percent)" (para. 11). After experiencing small group Bible study in her parish, O'Neel (2019) discovered the value of this approach. As shown in Figure 1.1, there are several reasons for using the small group Bible study method.

Rochow (2017) claims that while "only one in one hundred youth will pick up the Bible out of curiosity or interest" (para. 3), young people are "ten times more likely to read the Bible if they are involved in a group which encourages them to do so" (para. 3). This report of a young Christian student beginning his own small group Bible study during his lunchtime testifies to the power of a small group:

A Seventh-day Adventist schoolboy in Queensland, Australia, is conducting Bible studies during lunchtimes for his schoolmates. A group started by 15-year-old Byron Tolhurst and some of his peers has about 40 students attending, and numbers are growing weekly... The group is completely organized and led by the students... While Tolhurst's school has solid Christian foundations, not all students have a faith background... Tolhurst had never led Bible studies previously, but he says he has been part of multiple Bible study groups with great mentors. (Bridcutt, 2021, p. 1)

### Figure 1.1

#### *Reasons for Small Group Bible Study*

1. It builds a community of support.
2. It develops real friendships with like-minded people.
3. It provides a safe place to ask important life-changing questions.
4. It affords a structured, scheduled time for Bible study.
5. It fosters time for personal self-reflection.
6. It encourage the acceptance of others who have different ideas and values.
7. It can inspire group memeber to live a more Christ-like life.

*Note.* Adapted from *Top 10 Reasons for Small Group Bible Study* by K. O'Neel, 2019, para. 4, (<https://media.ascensionpress.com/2019/09/08/10-reasons-small-group-bible-study/>). Copyright 2022 by Ascension Press.

### **Teach Age-appropriate Biblical Literacy Skills**

Teachers can encourage and develop a student's love for the Bible by teaching age-appropriate biblical literacy skills and providing daily positive interactions with God's word (Fisher, 2014). In one Christian Middle School classroom students were being taught initial biblical literacy skills such as how to find texts in the Bible. One day a non-Christian parent contacted her son's Christian teacher. Her son, a member of this class, had requested a Bible for his birthday. He had never owned his own Bible. The parent decided to discuss her son's request with the teacher as she was unsure about buying a Bible, especially the right version she should buy for him. During the Bible study time in class, a few days later, a delighted student proudly read to his classmates from his treasured birthday gift, his own Bible. It was likely the only Bible in his household, and he most likely would have read a portion of it to his family that night. As teachers, we must never underestimate the power of God's Written Word in the classroom, in students' lives, and as part of the curriculum.

Encouraging age-appropriate biblical literacy in the twenty-first-century classroom is aided by teachers having access to a variety of age-appropriate Bible study methods and plans. Focused Bible study can inspire students to dig deeper into God's Word and so increase their biblical literacy. Focused study replaces haphazard and aimless Bible reading and encourages students to develop a greater appreciation of and love for God's Word. Knox (n.d.) described effective Bible study as "about being inquisitive and learning to ask questions. Be a detective. Look for clues. What's going on? What stands out to you? What don't you understand?" (p. 6).

### **Have an Awareness of the Differing Levels of Biblical Literacy Among Students**

Castle (1993) reminds teachers that through regular interaction with the Bible, the Living Word of God can speak to students and teach them. But teachers need to recognize that "A student's prior experience and familiarity with scripture generally will significantly influence their capacity to effectively engage with scriptural texts" (Catholic Identity, 2020, para. 9). While many unchurched students are enrolled in Christian Schools, some will have little or no prior knowledge of the Bible. Jackson (2021) maintained that "the



unchurched greet the study of the Bible as an exotic and interesting novelty. Their responses are remarkable and refreshing” (para. 5). Therefore, Bible study instruction in the classroom can support students who encounter God’s Word for the first time.

It was one such student, Eric’s, first week of classes at a Christian School. All students were required to attend the ‘Christian Studies Class’ and Eric showed up to his first class with great trepidation. Throughout the lesson, Eric heard the teacher say a person’s name, followed by numbers such as John 3:16, Luke 2:10, and Matthew 4:17. Eric assumed that the teacher and the named students were organising a meeting time after class (John @ 3:16 pm; Luke @ 2:10 pm, and Matthew @ 4:17 pm). Not until a few days later did Eric discover that the teacher was referring to references in the Bible, its books, and verses.

### **Provide Students with an Appropriate Bible Version**

Jackson (2021) recorded his experience selecting an appropriate Bible for his Christian classroom. He writes:

I spent twenty-seven years teaching in a Christian School that had an open enrolment policy. In our early days we decided to issue each student with their own Bible. We made the mistake of assuming the text needed to be paired with fun and interesting things. We chose the NIV “Teen Study Bible.” It was full of colour, lots of side bars and boxes with cool stories and sayings. Students read the side bars and the boxes but skipped the text. We dumped the Teen Study Bible, and went to a plain text, black letter Bible. We struggled for the next three or four years.

Then we were offered a thinline, bonded leather, centre reference, NIV Bible with maps, in its own box, for a remarkably low price. We issued that Bible to the incoming year sevens and got an overwhelming “Wow.” It looked like it was a valuable book. It was something worthy of protecting. We started selling Bible cases at the uniform shop. One young lady, whose family came to us from Iran, nearly burst with excitement. She couldn’t pronounce the word “Bible.” It was “my own Bibly.” This was a major turning point not only in the responses of our students, but in our understanding of our ministry. (Jackson, 2021, para. 6-7)

### **Encourage Students to Share their Experiences, Discoveries, and Motivation for Engaging in a Personal Biblical Literacy Quest**

Because teachers want their students to know the God of the Bible rather than just knowing their Bible (Briggs, 2018), sharing personal discoveries can deepen a student's faith and conviction and encourage their peers to continue discovering the God of the Bible. Opportunities for student sharing could include:

1. Providing opportunities for student-organised class devotionals where students share experiences and discoveries from their personal Bible study;
2. Matching older with younger students at a designated time each week to provide peer support and mentoring in the development of personal Bible study techniques and ideas;
3. Conferring in pairs or small groups to write a different conclusion to a biblical narrative;
4. Conducting local church worship programs, or school assemblies, where students share their personal Bible discoveries, convictions, and biblical quest;
5. Collaborating with multi-age student groups to use technology, music, and drama to create and present a Bible-based narrative for the School Spiritual Emphasis Week, a video production, or a sacred concert;
6. Recording a daily blog, journal, or diary so that students can share their Bible study reactions and discoveries via social media and digital platforms;
7. Role-playing a news reporter interviewing a costumed Bible character to be presented at the school assembly, a church program, or an aged-care unit; and
8. Providing art supplies in class before a Bible passage is read aloud to stimulate the student's creativity, group conversations, and discussions on the focus of the chosen Bible passage (Briggs, 2018).

Tozer (2013, as cited in May, 2017) reminds teachers that the "Perception of ideas rather than the storing of them should be the aim of education. The mind should be an eye to see with rather than a bin to store facts in" (para. 3).

## **What are Some Examples of Students Engaging in Bible Study?**

Two examples give a good idea of what teachers can witness in their classroom when students engage in Bible study for themselves. In the first story, at the beginning of the twelve-week semester at a Seventh-day Adventist School, the teacher read an Ellen White quote during Bible class: “There is nothing more calculated to energize the mind and strengthen the intellect than the study of the word of God” (White, 1943, p. 460). The teacher challenged her students to see what would happen to their grades by the end of the semester if they genuinely increased their interaction with God’s Word. She didn’t know if any student would accept her challenge.

After class Mark (not his real name), a committed young Christian, approached the teacher and shared how he struggled academically. He wanted to know if he increased his personal Bible study would his grades improve. The teacher encouraged Mark to experiment and discover for himself.

At the end of the twelve-week semester, Mark excitedly returned to tell his teacher the results of his personal Bible study challenge. He commented that when he commenced the experiment at the beginning of the semester, he was concerned that if he increased the time spent in personal Bible study, he would have less time to complete all his required class assignments. But he decided to ‘give it a go’ anyway. He wanted to see if his grades would improve by increasing his regular interactions with God’s Word.

A surprised Mark explained how he had discovered that he still had sufficient time to complete all his class requirements as he increased his personal Bible study! He learned that he never got behind in any required academic pursuit. When each assessed assignment was returned to him, his grades were much better than they had been in any other year. Mark could not believe the difference! He felt convinced that the mental power gained from his Bible study had assisted him in getting better grades. Mark said his conclusion had to be that his increased Bible study had positively affected his grades, and he was undoubtedly going to continue this new routine! He firmly believed that: “The mind thus brought in contact with the thoughts of the Infinite cannot but expand and strengthen” (White, 1952, p. 124).

The second story concerns The School for Life Project (SLP), formerly known as the Bible Summary Project, which is an excellent example of how biblical literacy can help improve academic and behavioural student outcomes. The SLP originated in Papua New Guinea and involves students spending around 30 minutes of class time each morning either copying Bible text (Grades K-8) or summarising a Bible passage in their own words (Grades 9-12). Results have shown that students in this project not only improve their English skills (e.g., spelling, sentence structure, summarisation), with a flow-on effect of improvements in other academic subjects, but there is also a marked improvement in their attitudes and behaviour (S. Keliwin, personal communication, August 1, 2001).

The idea for the SLP was birthed in 2005 by Serah Keliwin, then principal of the Pisik Adventist School, Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, as she sought ways to help a hard-working but struggling Grade 8 student improve his academic performance. Ben (not his real name) had failed all his subjects in Grade 7 and scored zero on every test for the first three months of Grade 8. In Papua New Guinea, Grade 8 is the final year of primary school, and students must pass the national Grade 8 examinations at the end of the year to proceed to high school the following year. After earnest prayer, Serah was impressed to introduce Bible text copying to Ben. In her own words, "in May 2005, I asked him to copy a verse a day, and he faithfully did it, with encouraging results within two weeks! By September, he was scoring 8/10 on his tests" (Keliwin, 2021, p. 64). He went on to pass all the national examination papers at the end of the year, scoring highest in his class in one subject and was able to fulfil his dream of going to high school (Keliwin, 2021).

Serah subsequently introduced Bible text copying to her whole class with the same pleasing results. In the following years, as Serah taught at other Adventist schools in Papua New Guinea, she had the opportunity to expand and adapt the Project to cater for all levels of schooling, with Bible text summarisation, rather than copying, being introduced at the high school level (S. Keliwin, personal communication, August 1, 2021).

In 2013, Serah started running training workshops for fellow Seventh-day Adventist teachers in Papua New Guinea and some government teachers. Her success in training others led her to accept

the position of Associate Education Director for the Seventh-day Adventist Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM) in 2016. In this role, she rolled the Project out to all Seventh-day Adventist Schools in Papua New Guinea. Serah reported that since then, some Seventh-day Adventist Schools that were struggling academically have “experienced first-hand how the School for Life Project can help improve the grades and behaviour of students” (Keliwin, 2021, p. 64).

Serah admitted, however, that there was initial resistance from several Seventh-day Adventist principals who did not want to be involved and “*had not encouraged students to be serious in their connection with God.*” However, when they realized that their schools were being left behind academically with continuing behaviour problems, things began “*gradually changing for the better because God is the driver of the project and what He has begun, He will finish for His glory!*” (S. Keliwin, personal communication, August 1, 2021).

At the time of writing (2021), the SLP concept is being shared with sister Seventh-day Adventist schools in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as with government schools in Papua New Guinea (Keliwin, 2021, p. 64), all with the same positive results. According to Serah, the most common feedback from parents is, “*There’s been a great change in attitude and behaviour in my child; not to mention the big improvement in [their] grades at school*” (S. Keliwin, personal communication, August 1, 2021).

Despite the success of the Project, Serah is quick to add, “*We do not want to give the impression that the SLP is the only thing happening at the school and discredit the hard work that our teachers are putting into their teaching in other areas. What we are saying is, when we invite or allow God to work with us daily, great things are sure to happen*” (S. Keliwin, personal communication, August 1, 2021). In a final word from Serah, “*God’s ways are easy, simple and timeless*” (Keliwin, 2021, p. 64)!

### **What Are Some Examples of Available Small Group Biblical Literacy Programs?**

Two biblical literacy programs illustrate how a small group Bible study approach can effectively teach biblical literacy. The first approach involves providing young people with a personal copy of the

World Changers Bible (*New Living Translation* [NLT], 1996/2011). This special edition Bible is intended for young people aged 10-35 in Australian Seventh-day Adventist Schools and the Island Nations of the Pacific (N. Kross, personal communication, July 26, 2022; Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Discipleship Ministries, 2018).

In 2013 the special edition of the World Changers Bible was created by Nick Kross (2019) to support the implementation of his new communal biblical literacy program. According to Bridcutt (2018), Kross was an Australian Seventh-day Adventist youth minister who wanted to promote “communal Bible reading and discussions” (para. 7) among his youth groups in Australia and the South Pacific. He envisioned a generation of young adults equipped “with the tools they need so that they may go out into their world and share Jesus with those in their community” (Kross, 2019, p. 1). Kross reported that “*Litiana Turner was also involved in the creation of the World Changers Bible project. I had the burden to place the Bibles in the hands of our youth, and Litiana (who was my associate Youth Director at the time) helped to develop the resource*” (N. Kross, personal communication, July 26, 2022).

Using the World Changers Bible, Kross has been able to promote his communal biblical literacy program to encourage group interaction and study (Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Youth Ministries, n.d.a). The notes inserted behind the front covers of the Bible provide material and “information on how to read the Bible, pray and share your faith with friends” (Kross, 2019, p. 4). There are sixteen discussion topics, including: What is a world changer? Time alone with God; Be in the word; Talking about Jesus; Starting out in the word; Steps to Jesus; and, Easy ways to share the Gospel story (SPD Discipleship Team, 2019; World Changers: Pathfinders, 2019). Kross (2019) encourages the readers of the World Changers Bible to “Take notes of what you are learning, so you’re better prepared for the next Bible reading with your group. There may be questions that need some research during the week” (p. 4). Resources to aid the implementation of this communal biblical literacy program include online training videos for each of the sixteen group discussion topics (Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Youth Ministries, n.d.a).

In addition to the Bible-inserted discussion notes, Kross has been instrumental in coordinating the writing and publishing of the World Changers Bible Reading Guides (Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Youth Ministries, n.d.b). These Reading Guides are presented as a booklet that, according to Kross (2019), covers “many of the core truths and discipleship principles in the Bible” (p. 1). The 41-page World Changers Bible Reading Guides discuss 58 biblical topics and fundamental beliefs. There are 28 biblically based topics covering “the main teachings of scripture,” with the remaining 30 topics providing “a framework for Christian discipleship and lifestyle” (Disciple, n.d., para. 2).

If the printed booklet is unavailable, the 58 topics can be viewed online (Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Youth Ministries, n.d.b). Printable bookmarks that cover the World Changer Bookmark Bible Study series (Adventist Church in New Zealand, n.d.) are also available online. Each of the 58 small group discussions in the World Changers Bible Reading Guides follows a simple repetitive program as outlined in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.2**

***Basic Program for Small Group Discussions in the World Changers Bible Reading Guides***

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The <b>number, title</b> of the Bible reading, and a <b>brief introduction</b> of the topic you will read about.</li> <li>2. <b>Key Scripture:</b> The story you will read together and a brief overview of the passage, to start your discussions and exploration of the Word.</li> <li>3. <b>Additional Scripture:</b> Some supporting stories and texts that will help to strengthen the key story.</li> <li>4. <b>Questions to consider:</b> These discussion questions will promote thinking and reflection on the stories you have read together. They will also encourage spiritual growth and encourage you to share your ideas with other friends.</li> </ol> |
|--|

*Note.* From “World Changers Bible Reading Guides”, by P. Kross, 2019, p. 3. (<https://www.following-jesus.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/World-Changers-Bible-Reading-Guide-FINAL-June-2019.pdf>).

Stackelroth (2022) commented that:

The program was about more than just providing Bibles to those who didn’t have access. With bookmark Bible study guides, discipleship tools, and a commitment to use their Bible to study with a friend, the World Changers project ensured that the faith developed in reading the Bible would be passed on (para. 6).

This biblical literacy program has been so successful that in 2018 The World Changers Bible had its fifth print run of 225,700 Bibles “including 1,200 World Changers Bibles in French” (Bridcutt, 2018, para. 5). Two years later, in 2022, the World Changers Bible project “is going global after the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to take on the rights” (Stackelroth, 2022, para. 1). According to Kross “*the total number of Bibles printed to date is 750,000*” (N. Kross, personal communication, July 26, 2022). Kross believed the Bibles were “*a God-inspired resource that has blessed our church since 2013 and will continue to be a blessing as new print runs are distributed to the youth across the globe*” (N. Kross, personal communication, July 26, 2022).

The second example of a successful small-group biblical literacy program is the Discovery Bible Study Guide (Discovery Bible Study Guide, n.d.a). According to the Discovery Bible Study Guide website, this biblical literacy program was developed by father and son David and Paul Watson as a ‘discipleship-making’ resource (Discovery Bible Study Guide, n.d.b). In 2008, David Watson became the project manager for a team that created the Obedience Based Discipleship Field Testing Guide: Version 1.5 (Watson, 2008). The guide describes how to use the Discovery Bible Study Guide approach, summing up this biblical literacy approach as “Read, obey, and share” (Watson, 2008, p. 6). A more recent Discovery Bible Reading Guide has been written by Roennfeldt (2021, p. 25).

Because it can be applied as a personal Bible study approach or as a small group Bible study method, the Discovery Bible Study Guide is a well-utilised biblical literacy program implemented in many Christian churches (Hill, 1995; Hinzie, 2020; Roennfeldt, 2021; Watson, 2008). The Discovery Bible Study Guide employs an Inductive Bible Study approach that encourages readers to make “observations on a passage of Scripture” and draw “conclusions based on those observations” (Hill, 1995, p. 1). According to the Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Discipleship Ministries (n.d.b) website, “Discovery Bible Reading involves the simple process of prayerfully reading aloud or together with a passage of scripture and discovering Jesus’ truth as a group” (para. 1). Hinzie (2020), commenting on the Discovery Bible Study Guide, pointed out that:



This Bible study is easy to lead... There are no wrong answers. If a question comes up that the leader does not know the answer to, they can simply reply, “I don’t know the answer to that, but I can find out and get back to you. (para. 9)

The basic program for use by leaders and presenters of the Discovery Bible Study Program is outlined in Figure 1.3. Hinzie (2020) stated that their Discovery Bible Study group limits the group size to four participants to encourage full participation. Hinzie (2020) further contended that most of the people joining their biblical literacy group “have never had this kind of Bible study” where they are “asked about their thoughts or opinions” because usually they are “only taught what to believe” (para. 12). An introductory Discovery Bible Reading Guide video, presented by Kross, explains the biblical literacy plan and its implementation (Seventh-day Adventist Church South Pacific, Discipleship Ministries, n.d.a). Christian teachers can learn more about the Discovery Bible Study Guide approach by accessing various online digital resources, including instructional videos, bookmarks, webinars, PowerPoint presentations, online blogs, and a digital Discovery App.

### Figure 1.3

#### *Discovery Bible Study Guide Program*

<b>Group Discovery Bible Study Program</b>
1. Commence the Bible study with prayer.
2. One person reads the selected Bible story or Bible passage. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A second person re-reads the Bible story or Bible passage.</li> <li>• A third person retells the Bible story or passage in their own words.</li> </ul>
3. The group discusses five simple questions about the Bible story or passage. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Q1- What is new information to you?</li> <li>Q2- What surprises you in this reading?</li> <li>Q3- What don’t you understand from this Bible story or passage?</li> <li>Q4- What will you obey or apply from this reading?</li> <li>Q5- What will you share this week from this reading?</li> </ul>
4. After the group discussion, the Bible study concludes with prayer.

*Note.* Adapted from “Discovery Bible Reading”, P. Roennfeldt, n.d., pp. 1-3. (<https://disciple.org.au/resources/discovery-bible-reading/>). Copyright 2016 by Australian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

### **What Are Some Examples of Experiential Learning Involving Biblical Knowledge, Values, and Principles?**

Experiential learning has been described as “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences” (Jeffs, 1999, as cited in Gross & Rutland, 2017, para. 2). It has been more specifically defined as “learning through reflection on doing” (Felicia, 2011, as cited in “Experiential Learning,” 2022).

The following two examples illustrate how biblical knowledge, values, and principles can be passed on to students through participation in, and reflection on, direct, practical, hands-on learning experiences. The first is a system-based program sponsored by the Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, entitled STORMCo (Service to Others Really Matters Company). The second involves a school gardening program based at the Toronto Seventh-day Adventist School in New South Wales, Australia.

Based on the principles of learning through doing and reflection, STORMCo is described as “an adventure-based short-term mission program” designed to enable students to “put their faith into practice” rather than just being told about Christianity in the classroom (Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2022a, para. 1).

STORMCo teams consist of a group of students and their leaders from a particular Seventh-day Adventist school or church who travel to the same outback town or community each year, usually for a week during their mid-year holidays, “with the intent to serve others without a pre-determined agenda or expectation of anything in return. Their goal is to present the Christian faith in action by building long-term relationships and being a refreshing influence on the entire community” (Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2022a, para. 4). The particular service activities they will engage in are determined in consultation with local community leaders. In the process, students engage in, reflect on, and develop biblical practices and values such as outlined on the STORMCo website (Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2022a, Section on Purpose):

1. Understand a community by LISTENING to its unique story and serve accordingly.

2. Seek to ENGAGE the entire community over a period of time.
3. SERVICE without expectation as a reflection of unconditional love.
4. Join daily as a team in PRAYER to build and focus team unity.
5. Determine to RETURN and continue to build long-term relationships.

Each participant is presented with a Team Member Journal, which enables and encourages them to reflect on and document their learning experiences in each of the five areas listed above (Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2022b, Section on Team Member Journal).

In summary:

STORMCo mission trips bring the message of Christianity directly to an entire community, and lives are changed in the process. The community sees Seventh-day Adventist Christianity as something that meets needs that exist in a practical way, and team members see the ideals and values they learn in church and school put into practice. (Seventh-day Adventist Church, North New South Wales, 2020, para. 2)

Avondale School in Cooranbong, New South Wales, is one of many Seventh-day Adventist schools and churches throughout Australia and other parts of the world that provide students with the opportunity to be involved in STORMCo trips. Every year for 23 years, Avondale School has taken a team of around 20 to 40 students on a STORMCo trip to the Australian outback town of Cobar, the town designated for them in New South Wales. In a telephone conversation Jonathan Christian, the current team leader for the Avondale School group, described some of the activities of the Avondale STORMCo program that impact students and draw them closer to God (J. Christian, personal communication, June 26, 2022):

1. Students volunteer to be accepted into the team and pay to cover costs.
2. While many are Christians, others are not. All students sign a code of conduct before they can participate stating that they will conduct themselves according to Christian principles.

3. During worship time on the first day, students are asked to randomly select a promise out of a Bible promise box after praying that God will help them choose the right promise. Jonathan described how some students come back with tears in their eyes, saying that the promise they selected was just the right one for them.
4. For evening worships during the week, students are asked to share their "God moments" for the day. As the week progresses, more and more students excitedly want to share how God has been working in their lives for that day.
5. In small groups, each with the guidance of an adult mentor, students take turns leading out in morning and evening worship based on the theme for the year. In 2022, the theme was BFG "Big Friendly God". Students grow in confidence as they find creative ways to lead the worship programs.
6. On Wednesday evening, students participate in a communion service emphasizing the cross. Appropriate visuals and music help to make the service very meaningful for the students. Those who are not Christians are encouraged to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. Jonathan shared that many are "blown away" as they come to understand God's great love for them.
7. Each day, students are involved in service to the community where they can build relationships and share the love of God with community members, with no expectation of compensation in return.
8. Mornings are spent running a "Kids' Club" for over 85 primary-aged children. Activities include games, crafts, face painting, and songs and dramas about Jesus.
9. Afternoons are spent on community service projects in liaison with community leaders. This may include hanging out with the local youth playing sports at the local youth sports centre. The local community liaison person has asked if the team could come every six months because, for about three months after each visit the kids' don't swear as much, and are much better behaved.

10. Some afternoons are spent cleaning homes and yards for disadvantaged people. Jonathan shared how, for this, he has no pre-planned homes in mind but rather uses the occasion to allow students to experience the awesome power of prayer in finding people who need help. Once the students are on the bus, Jonathan prays that God will lead them to the right homes and then tells students that if they feel impressed to turn in a certain direction as he drives slowly along the streets, they are to say, “Turn left,” or “Turn right.” If everyone agrees, he will turn in that direction. After several such turns, they inevitably find a place where help is needed. These experiences of answered prayer have a huge impact on the students.
11. The program’s overall spiritual aim is for the local community’s students and people to be impacted by the love of God. This is a seed-sowing opportunity, and the results may not be known for years to come.

In the second example of experiential learning, which comes from Toronto Seventh-day Adventist School, New South Wales, Australia, hands-on experience in a school-based gardening project has become the focal point for teaching students about God through His second book - that of nature. Charmony Diaz, the current principal of the three-teacher primary school, shared via email some of the background to the project, what it entails, and some of the outcomes (C. Diaz, personal communication, July 22, 2022).

The current focus on nature-based learning commenced at the beginning of 2019 when, after much Bible Study, research, and prayer, Toronto Seventh-day Adventist School sought to transition from its traditional roots into a specialised school that “*focused on learning with nature, learning with others, and learning with Jesus*” (C. Diaz, personal communication, July 22, 2022). Diaz stressed further that with this renewed focus, “*teachers are passionate about delivering quality education in an organic and flexible framework, acknowledging that spiritual, academic, physical and emotional growth is non-linear and multidimensional.*” In addition, “*teachers are guides and facilitators, learning alongside students, and making meaningful connections to the world around us*” (C. Diaz, personal communication, July 22, 2022).

Although the school already had a garden for students to grow things, the decision “*to focus more fully on nature and with an even greater focus on the spiritual*”, led to the school “*implement[ing] Garden Time each week, when the whole school participates in planting, harvesting, weeding, and learning about animals.*” Diaz emphasised that “*we are now implementing a nature-based approach to learning in other areas. It is our current goal or challenge to see what we can do to integrate nature with learning in as many ways as we can*” (C. Diaz, personal communication, July 22, 2022).

According to Diaz some of the practical applications and outcomes of this nature-based approach to learning by doing and reflection include:

1. Worships and weekly Chapel programs are sometimes conducted outdoors in a special nature meeting area.
2. When learning about animals, children are led to understand the unique and special features of each animal that God has created and how He expects us to look after them.
3. Nature is linked to lessons about creation, etc.
4. In their study on Heaven, the K/1 class recently went for a walk around the school and identified things in nature that have been marred by sin.
5. Older children do nature journaling and this is linked back to God's creation.
6. The school has a pet guinea pig and children learn the value of responsibility when caring for their pet.
7. The older students are pen pals with retired people at Avondale House, a nearby Aged Care facility, and they write to each other and share nature (e.g., flowers).
8. Students learn collaboratively, not just in their own classrooms but also with the teachers and students of other classrooms as they all worship, read, garden, and play together.
9. Multi-grade experiences are invaluable in strengthening compassion and empathy, social skills, and healthy relationships.

10. Senior students have unique opportunities to become mentors and experts on campus.

Finally, in reflecting on the value of the program, Diaz stated that:

*“...we have noted significant benefits of this approach to learning, and they have been particularly obvious during the COVID pandemic. Students are calmer, and there are less student management issues. It has also had a positive impact on student well-being.”* (C. Diaz, personal communication, July 22, 2022)

## Conclusion

In July 2022, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released 2021 census data that included an optional question about religious affiliation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Compared with the 2016 census, Australia had more religious diversity and more respondents espousing no religion in 2021; however, Christianity remained the “most common religion” (ABS, 2022, para. 1).

Of concern was a key finding that Christianity had “decreased by more than 1 million people” (ABS, 2022, para. 1). The decline was most noticeable in the 18-25 age group (ABS, 2022). It is conceivable that many respondents aged 18-19 would have recently completed their high school education, with many graduating from Christian high schools. The authors propose that this decline in Christianity in the 18-25-year-old age group could have been even more extreme if Christian schools had not offered engaging and interactive biblical literacy programs. Because many Christian schools have unchurched students in their classrooms, Christian teachers have a God-given opportunity and responsibility to share and demonstrate the loving care and faithfulness of the God of the Bible. It is anticipated that students will discover Jesus and find hope for the future, regardless of their background, through an engaging and interactive biblical literacy program.

In a world of increasing global unrest, secularization, atheism, natural disasters, domestic violence, and mental health issues, the next generation and our leaders of tomorrow need to be given a sense of

hope for the future. This can be provided by a personal and interactive engagement with a loving God gained through an interactive biblical literacy program. With the variety of biblical literacy resources available, Christian teachers can provide opportunities for students to discover for themselves the benefits, hope, and blessings to be gained from a personal encounter and daily experience with the loving God of the Bible.



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