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Blog: Emerging Research and Practice in SEL

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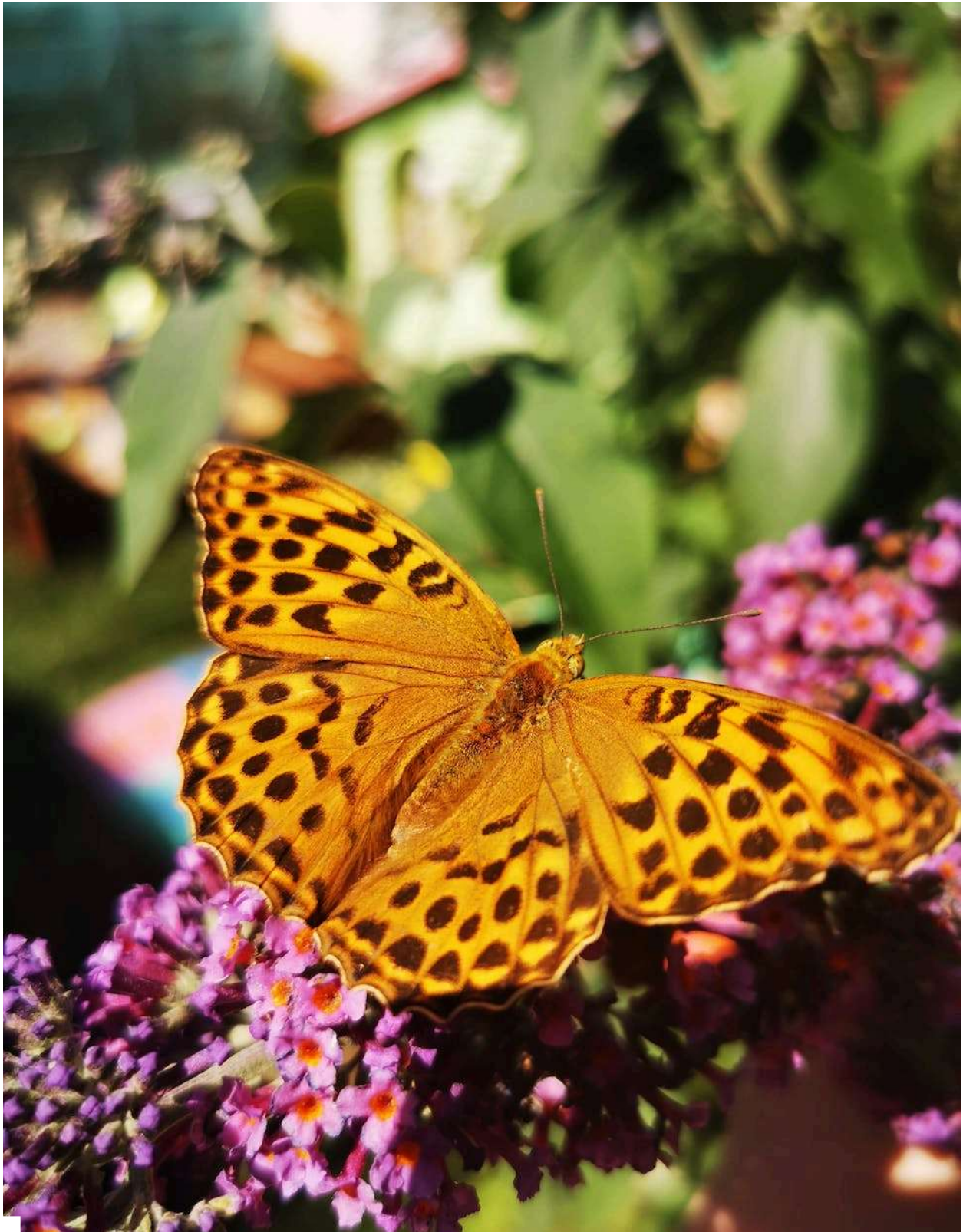
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Social Emotional Growth in School Gardens

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The emergent literature exploring the role of school gardens in social and emotional development has continued to expand in recent years. Their role in supporting positive change within the context of social and emotional learning has become more nuanced (Chawla et al., 2014; Ohly et al., 2016; Pollen & Retzlaff-Furst, 2021; Sobel, 2005). Gardens are not only therapeutic environments for anxiety-reduction (Maller, 2009), they also help mitigate stress and offer a “safe haven” from daily school pressures (Chawla et al., 2014). Students gain confidence about what they know through perseverance and problem solving while also experiencing opportunities for creativity and critical thinking (Moore et al., 2015). Learning in school gardens invites community participation as families can support their children’s excitement about garden-based learning through sharing personal knowledge and expertise in professional trades or cultural knowledge related to growing food or cooking regional and familial cuisine, fostering connectedness between school and home (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2015; Korchmaros & Haverly, 2017).

In our ongoing research on the role of school gardens in fostering resilience among elementary school students, we have observed that garden spaces, because they are different from classroom spaces in multiple ways, allow for more opportunities for social and emotional learning bolstered by experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the garden there are permeable boundaries, nature can be entered into instead of simply looked at, and the activities that occur there connect cognitive and social and emotional skills.

In our observations of fourth grade students, comparing those who had regular access to gardens to those who did not, we found gardens, cultivated, and maintained by students, were sites for engagement with social and emotional growth and stability through an affective, transpersonal sense of belonging and worth. The gardens provided opportunities for both individual and group work, with the common goal of maintaining the plants and animals there. Students shared stories about activities, plants, and animals in the gardens and how they helped them regulate their emotions and reduce stress. One student shared how she loves the chickens and told a story about one day when she was feeling really “stressed” and “asked to go to the bathroom but went and looked at the chickens instead.” Another student talked about a weaving activity done in the garden that she enjoyed because it helped her feel calm.

The gardens were also places of joy and cooperative problem solving. When asked about working in the gardens, one student said, “it helped me go with the flow and helped me to be calm and appreciate cultures.” Another shared, “it was fun learning about the science of putting things together, and even though there were difficulties, overcoming them.”

School gardens allow for both intra and interpersonal development as well as greater community and cultural connections that support and deepen students’ social-emotional development. While students, teachers, and families continue to recover and adjust to a post-COVID world, school gardens provide a powerful learning environment that fosters social and emotional growth and well-being for all.

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