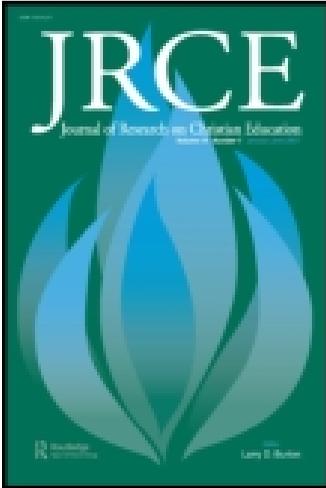


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Gifts From the Classical Christian Method to Improve Service for Students Who Are Gifted

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REVIEW

Gifts From the Classical Christian Method to Improve Service for Students Who Are Gifted

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While educators throughout America are making strides to adequately educate students across a wide spectrum of needs and aptitudes, increasing government regulation such as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and calls for accountability may be hindering the educational progress of the best and brightest, as recently by noted Peters and colleagues in 2014. This article reports strategies and research pointing to successful methods in the education of those who are gifted, especially techniques drawn from a resurgence of the classical Christian method. Techniques discussed include mastery based, integrated curriculum, learning how to think/metacognition, Latin as foundational to multiple language fluency, and Christ-centered as opposed to child-centered educational focus.

While educators throughout America are making strides to adequately educate students across a wide spectrum of needs and aptitudes, increasing government regulation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and calls for accountability may be hindering the educational progress of the best and brightest (Peters et al., 2014). Several reports, as cited by Peters et al. (2014), including the “Federal Office of Educational Research and Improvement’s National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent,” indicate that students who were identified as advanced are underserved in traditional American classrooms. The current article reports strategies and research pointing to successful methods in serving students who are gifted. These

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are methods that today's grandparents may have learned in Sunday school—a resurgence of the classical Christian method.

Educational visionary Lillian Pace, Senior Director of KnowledgeWorks foundation in Cincinnati, Ohio, observed that American education seems to be following the rapid upheaval and similar to what has occurred in the communications industry in the past decade (2013, p. 32). In her commentary published by *Education Week*, Pace (2013) said that learning should be constant while how long it takes to master a concept or skill will vary student to student; a more personalized approach is on the way.

Christian apologists have long called for a return to the study of Great Books, logical thinking, and eloquent expression as an improvement to education for the masses in both Great Britain (Lewis, 1974; Sayers, 1947) and America (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006; Wilson, 1999). As Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) founder Wilson (2003) stated in his book, *The Case For Classical Christian Education*, we live in an era that glorifies change, throwing out tried and true methods in favor of whatever new idea is in vogue, and that has led to “a mess that just won't quit” in America's public educational system including lower test scores, school violence and drug abuse (p. 15). Research suggests that students attending religious schools have shown less of a decline: Jaynes' (2012) meta-analysis of public, private and charter schools points to both cultural and academic advantages for students of all socio-economic levels who attend Christian religious schools. Additionally, youngsters graduating from ACCS schools, score in the top 5% to 10% nationwide on standardized college entrance exams (ACCS, 2013). These Christian schools follow an ancient developmental pattern of mastery-based instruction known as the Trivium as part of a larger concept of *paideia*, or the entire cultural, spiritual and intellectual bringing up of the next generation (Wilson, 1999). Wilson points to divine accountability for parents cited by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:4 making a Christian *paideia* paramount for their children.

CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN METHOD EXPLAINED

The ACCS classical Christian pedagogical and philosophical assumptions are based in part on a definition of what is classical drawn from Sayers' 1947 essay, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, and Wilson's 1991 book *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*. In the ACCS (2001) *Position Paper #2: What Constitutes "Classical & Christian" for ACCS?* the Trivium is defined as consisting of three parts: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Sayers' (1947) pedagogy and methodology assume developmental stages in three broadly defined categories correlated to the Trivium. The *Poll-parrot stage* in which young children like to memorize and chant various bits of information coincides with the grammar stage of the Trivium, roughly elementary school ages (Sayers, 1947).

As children grow into their pre- and early teens, they become more argumentative and questioning; this is called the *Pert stage*, and coincides with the dialectic aspect of the Trivium (Sayers, 1947). This stage of development is critical in developing higher order thinking skills such as categorization, organization, logical and critical synthesis and evaluation, theorization of hypotheses, questioning and defending positions (Sayers, 1947). It is learning to use the facts that have been accumulated during the Poll-parrot stage of grammar and roughly coincides with the middle school years.

In the mid- to late teens, children seem to be more vocal and expressive; this is called the *Poetic stage*, and coincides with the Trivium's area of rhetoric (Sayers, 1947). This is the polish, public speaking and performance stage and roughly coincides with the high school years. Sayers (1947) described the elements of the Trivium this way:

The whole of the Trivium was, in fact, intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning, before he began to apply them to "subjects" at all. First, he learned a language; not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of a language, and hence of language itself—what it was, how it was put together, and how it worked. Secondly, he learned how to use language; how to define his terms and make accurate statements; how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument. Dialectic, that is to say, embraced Logic and Disputation. Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language—how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively.

The classical Christian educator assumes that the great books of Western culture are necessary to appreciate the arguments of Western thought (ACCS, 2001). This prepares them to debate head-on and unafraid out in the world each will enter as an adult. Other components of classical Christian education advocated by Sayers (1947) and Wilson (2003) and shared by Van Tassel-Baska (2004), are the idea of an integrated curriculum and the advantages of instruction in Latin.

How can classical Christian methods help educators replicate these kinds of results and serve gifted students in all schools? Diversification with mastery based ability grouping is one answer. Teaching metacognitive skills, learning how to learn, with an integrated curricular approach is another. Teaching from a Christian moral perspective is a third.

THE PROBLEM

A front-page article in the October 1 trade publication *Education Week* (Fleming, 2013) cited a call from parents for educational diversification of instruction for students who are gifted. While the needs of such students are addressed in federal legislation, no federal mandates were issued

regarding providing specific services and no federal dollars have been allocated, wrote Fleming (2013), “Dollars are tight and other needs are deemed more pressing” (para 2).

Under the 2004 IDEIA reauthorization, America’s struggling public schools are making strides to adequately educate students across a wide spectrum of needs and aptitudes predominantly within the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). By utilizing methods and strategies gleaned from the classical education movement such as diversification coupled with metacognitive instruction and practice, students who are gifted should be able to achieve higher levels of performance. In VanTassel-Baska and Wood’s (2010) article, the authors tie their integrated curriculum model to differentiated instruction for students who are gifted, and argue persuasively for its applications in all classrooms to promote transfer of learning through embedding higher-order thinking skills in all subject matter. Tying knowledge together instead of separating it into seemingly unrelated subjects hearkens back to the classical concept of a well read, well studied Renaissance man (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006). Dishearteningly, increasingly intrusive accountability testing under the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation necessitates another direction. Multiple choice standardized test practices drive accountability and instruction is geared toward rigid, age-based class placements (Pace, 2013) with considerable time spent re-teaching (Peters, et al., 2014).

THE GIFTS OF CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Educators now have access to a treasure chest of instructional strategy gifts ready to be pulled from the resurgence of the classical method of education. According to Strachan’s November 5, 2013, article, “Why Classical Schools Just Might Save America”, those who “value truth, morality, the unfettered pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, and the Western canon” (para 3) should look to the classical Christian education movement to find what is missing in American public schools. The classical method includes the study of Latin and Greek coupled with the “development of analytical and critical faculties” as opposed to accumulating a shallowly defined collection of facts (Strachan, 2013, para 6). In other words, Strachan promotes language acquisition that allows students to read the great books of Western civilization as primary sources within an integrated curricular model that teaches students how to tie knowledge together, analyze, synthesize, and make critical judgments. These students have learned how to learn.

METACOGNITION

Stankov and Kleitman (2014) found evidence suggesting that metacognition is related to maturation—students older than age 11 years perform better in

metacognitive activities than those younger than nine. In the four studies Stankov and Kleitman analyzed, all showed strong evidence in support of ties between learning and metacognitive functions. Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) researchers recently recognized the need for making learning about learning paramount. Morrissey (2011) looked at how mothers perceive giftedness in preschool age children and start developing metacognition and higher order thinking skills from birth. In an article published in *Exceptional Children*, Morrissey (2011) found and listed strategies such as modeling, verbal and non-verbal cues, marking features and discrepancies, simplifying/paraphrasing and positive reinforcement as yielding positive increases in intelligence quotient in young students. Morrissey's study also showed increased metacognitive play initiated by mothers of children who were later identified as gifted. As these children developed, the mothers faded modeling and shifted learning to self-direction by the student. Students from the study, later identified as gifted, developed faster and became independent faster.

Morrissey's (2011), Stankov and Kleitman's (2014) studies are an important tie to the classical Christian method, which promotes learning about learning or metacognition as one of its tenets. As Morrissey (2011) found with parental modeling during play, Michigan State Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Milton Gregory, directed teachers to model learning activities. In Gregory's (1884) book, *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, law number five states that expert teachers will arouse and direct self-activities of their students in order to stimulate them to learn for themselves. Gregory, a Baptist minister, also served as President of the University of Illinois; his Seven Laws now are part of the foundational texts of the classical Christian resurgence promoted by the ACCS (2012).

MASTERY-BASED ABILITY GROUPING

Authors of the *Handbook for Gifted Education*, Colangelo and Davis (2003), cite research disputing the notion that nurture has the stronger influence on cognitive development when it comes to students who are gifted. They argue that while giftedness seems to result from a confluence of factors including social/emotional/cultural, it also seems to be more affected by genetics than any other studied factor. The argument for genetic predisposition argues well for classical Christian education methods as the pedagogical model of choice for students who are gifted since it promotes both developmentally grouping students and is based on mastery rather than biological age. If giftedness was more strongly influenced by environment, then it could be trained into many students. Colangelo and Davis' (2003) research seems to support the Biblical notion that God made each person with varying gifts and levels of giftedness (1 Corinthians 12:4, Romans 12:6).

Olthouse and Miller (2012) wrote in *Teaching Exceptional Children* that gifted writers seek out other gifted writers and excel when challenged by others at or above their skill level; homogenous grouping for students who are gifted can promote peer-coaching and opportunities for accelerated learning through modeling, coaching, and motivational activities such as contests and professional publication. These findings are important in that they support the argument Colangelo and Davis (2003) make about gifted students flourishing when grouped with other gifted students and adults in project-based learning. This research also supports the classical Christian method as a good fit for students who are gifted since this method groups the students by level of mastery and developmental stage, not biological age. For example, a nine-year-old student performing at the dialectical level in a classical Christian school would be grouped with older students who also had reached the level of instructional emphasis on logic and analysis after having mastered the required knowledge base of facts in the grammar stage.

DIFFERENTIATION, ACCELERATION, AND ABILITY GROUPING

The Christian-based classical school model aligns well with further research by Van Tassel-Baska (2013) and others, indicating that differentiation of technique and grouping by ability supported students who are gifted. In her article in *Gifted Child Today*, Van Tassel-Baska (2013) makes a strong case for ability grouping based on evidence that gifted learners thrive when placed with other gifted learners. Recent research by Walsh et al. (2012) in *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* supports this view in arguing for differentiation (higher levels of rigor performing similar tasks to peers in regular classroom setting) and ability grouping (students performing at higher levels of rigor grouped together) toward more challenging materials even at the earliest ages for students who are gifted. Accelerated classes, enrichment of regular educational fare, advanced academic and cognitive stimulation, ability grouping and utilization of better and earlier identification methods are all advocated by Walsh et al. (2012).

STUDENTS WHO ARE TWICE EXCEPTIONAL

Weinfeld et al. (2005) found in their study of the twice-exceptional (those students who are gifted with a coincidence of other needs that require support in areas of relative weak academic, physical or socio-behavioral skills) published in *Teaching Exceptional Students* that students become frustrated and bored when not challenged—thus, differentiating to enrich/accelerate/sophisticate areas of strength should take first priority. Some such students, as identified by Williamson et al. (2012), come from within the

Autism or Asperger's spectrum of diagnosis and may qualify as gifted but manifest a slower rate of processing than peers for abstractions such as metaphors. Tan et al. (2013) specifically point to recognizing and comprehending metaphors as a measure of giftedness in *Educational and Child Psychology*. These twice-exceptional students are often overlooked in the identification process for gifted programs in public schools since their area of weakness often is more obvious to the observer. As Bianco and Leech (2010) published in *Teacher Education and Special Education*, all teachers were less likely to refer students to gifted programs if they had a disability label. Since many Christian schools do not promote labeling of disabilities as part of the educational paradigm, twice exceptional students should be encouraged to participate at their highest levels of ability in mastery-based placements to encourage areas of giftedness. In classical Christian schools these students may work with multiple class groupings based on developmental level—grammar for areas in need of more substantial knowledge base development and dialectic for coursework where analytical skills are already emerging.

WHY LATIN?

Latin instruction, as outlined by Strachan, is one of the central tenants of a classical education (2013). In her article published by the *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, Van Tassel-Baska (2004) outlines the benefits of Latin instruction for students who are gifted to begin no later than middle school years. According to Van Tassel-Baska (2004) and Wilson (2003), Latin instruction increases vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension skills as well as other language acquisition skills. Latin instruction increases higher-order thinking, is cross- and multi-disciplinary by integrating history, cultural and linguistic studies. These findings refute those of Holliday (2012), who argued from findings based mostly in the 1990s that it is how Latin is taught and not Latin instruction *per se* that is the key to higher scores on standardized tests. As a recognized researcher and practitioner, Van Tassel-Baska's article carries significant weight in favor of a Latin-based accelerative/enriched curriculum necessary for students who are gifted to flourish.

MORAL EDUCATION

Morality seems to be another significant variable when comparing educational outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). In researchers Kim and Sankey's (2009) study of morality and developmental psychology, the authors describe a recursive and integrative model for use in understanding the development of moral judgment in youngsters. The basic process of making value choices seems to be inherent in humans but can be directed and developed, according to Kim and Sankey (2009). This, then, is our call to include moral

reasoning in our educational process, “there is a value component in all learning, memory and action,” (Kim & Sankey, 2009, p.296). The authors argue that “each child is an emergent self-organising organism” who tends to develop in a “highly variable, dynamic and often non-linear” fashion. Kim and Sankey call for a renewed address of moral education in schools (2009). The Christ-centered model of education addresses moral instruction as flowing from the Biblical premise of God as truth, creator and sustainer (Smithwick, 2014). As Colossians 1:17 states, Christ is before all things and in Him all things consist. Smithwick contends that without Christ at the center, education has no “spiritual capital” or moral authority (2014, p. 2). The Apostle Paul urged us in Romans 12:12 not to conform to the ways of this world but to transform our minds in order to understand the perfect will of God. The world measures educational outputs by knowledge; Christ-centered education looks for wisdom and eloquence in graduating students (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006).

ENGAGEMENT AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

In a qualitative dissertation, Zabloski (2010) investigated reasons behind student dropout among those who were identified as gifted. According to the literature presented, as many as 20% of high school dropouts may be gifted and suffering from bullying, boredom and feelings of not fitting in with the crowd (Zabloski, 2010). Zabloski’s interviewees mostly cited poor relationships such as those with teachers as a common reason why each felt disengaged and dropped out of school. Similar findings were published by Landis and Reschly (2013) in the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* and by Morris (2013) in a phenomenological investigation, finding that gifted students in public school often felt under-challenged and under-valued. This is important as a call to action for both public schools and parents. As authors Davis and Rimm (2011) of *Education of the Gifted and Talented* point out, students require at least a moderate sense of challenge, choice and self-direction. When students who are gifted feel connected to learning, troublesome behaviors are reduced (Davis & Rimm, 2011).

Clinkenbeard (2012) discussed what motivated and bored gifted students and how self-expectations and societal expectations affect gifted students’ motivation in public schools in her article in *Psychology in the Schools*. Clinkenbeard suggested that public schools need to convince gifted students of the long term benefits of tasks, no matter how distasteful they seem at present, and allow enough choice so that students can select tasks of personal interest and value. As Gregory (1884) stated, when students choose self-activities they learn to stimulate the love of learning in themselves.

CONCLUSION

Pulling It All Together

Klimis and Van Tassel-Baska (2013) described one school district's successful experiment in homogenous grouping for gifted education at the middle school age level in *Gifted Child Today*. The program was developed in response to parental advocacy and gifted student dissatisfaction with courses and opportunities. Klimis and VanTassel-Baska (2013) articulated common curricula across the three schools as well as common goals: the development of higher level thinking skills including problem solving, aesthetics and self-awareness, including motivation by competition. The authors wrote that this model can serve as a blueprint for other districts in serving gifted students. In classical Christian circles, these same ideas are articulated as stimulating self-learning (Gregory, 1884), recognizing what is true, beautiful and good by studying great masters in art/literature, and pursuing excellence (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006). With attention to the integration of curriculum, diversification with ability grouping by mastery, increased access to accelerated and enriched curriculum, and moral character development flowing from knowing the mind of Christ, many of the things that our grandparents learned in Sunday school can be applied to improving gifted education in all of America's schools today.

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