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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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The Particular Prospects of the Pre-Polly Stage

by Tom Garfield

Part II of this article will appear in the January 2006 issue.

I Cor. 13:11: “When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”

Children are profoundly different than adults—not just smaller versions. They speak, but it is a different speech we must understand before we can correct it. They think, but along lines different than ours. For example, impressions are made more through all the senses, not just seeing or hearing. They reason, but not in the kind of adult logic we must train them in. Again, we need to **understand** this in order to best correct and guide them to maturity.

There is a need to identify this particular time in a child’s life—the early grammar stage. Problems with ignoring or not studying the unique elements of this age group. I will state up front and clearly that I wanted to address this topic out of a concern I have for what I perceive is a widespread misconception in ACCS schools. That misconception is that children entering school for the first time, five and six year olds, should be taught and trained in the very same way as students who are eight and nine. So the age group I am identifying as being in the Pre-Polly stage are students from about five to seven, or as we normally place them, students in kindergarten through the first part of the second grade.

Essentially the problems with not identifying and “cutting with the grain” of this age-group are the same problems we would have if we ignored the distinctions between the Pert and Poetic stages. That is:

1. We deny the built-in, natural differences between these students and older students thereby likely wasting our teaching efforts in large measure, at the very least, and possibly doing some harm in the process

in dulling them to the joys of learning. Just as it is possible to teach the fundamentals of formal logic to fourth graders by making a force-fit, through memorization we can force a lot of higher level math into the minds of five year olds. But then we shouldn’t be surprised if they take little interest in the topic, nor use it well in years to come, since it was thrust upon them too soon, with little consideration for their innate interests. We stole our own thunder, but worse, we will be trying to build absent a foundation.

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The Particular Prospects...

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2. We do not take advantage of the unique characteristics of this stage. They are just beginning school; it's the "wet cement" time in their lives. All their experiences up to this point have been at home and with their families. Impressions are made easily, but can last for quite some time. Try to remember your earliest memories—they are probably around four or five. Think of the things that impressed you: bright colorful ob-

jects, various animals, events that affected your body (pain, illness, thrills), first independent acts (using a strange bathroom, your first favorite book), first friends, first group of classmates doing exciting things like playing with the parachute, going on field trips, having theme days. Gregory's *The Seven Laws of Teaching* says, "As children approach maturity, their interests tend to change from the concrete and more self-centered things to the abstract and ultimate." We'll look at more ways to use these distinct characteristics for effective teaching.

3. We disregard the essence of Gregory's "Law of the Lesson:" connecting the new material still to be learned to what is already familiar. This is the time to establish the first layer of Legos. These building blocks are the foundation or first principles, that all further learning will be connected to in the coming Poll-Parrot. Another way of understanding this critical first step is establishing mental categories for further data. These categories will and must be, to some extent, conceptual in nature.

4. The latent, but largest, problem with not identifying the need for teaching to a Pre-Polly level is that we won't see the results of a poor foundation until years down the road. One of the greatest failures of the government school system is in this very

regard—trying to force feed little ones with "higher critical thinking skills," as though "critical thinking" was an art these schools were versed in at any level. And like most of the disasters foisted on us by that establishment, the downstream effects of their experiments are having disastrous results long after there's any chance to correct them. Teaching by its very nature is a long-term proposition; classical education is certainly no different. Our learning curve can't be forced. We will overlook opportunities even with all our good intentions. Therefore, we must exercise even greater care with the foundations we lay.

Historical pedagogies begin at age 7-8 years, even in the classical trivium, according to The Lost Tools... by Dorothy Sayers.

When we adopted the *Lost Tools* as our road map for our educational philosophy, one comment Sayers made always bothered me. In the article she states that in her hypothetical school, she would teach students the Trivium, but she would start with children who could "read, write, and cipher." That would be her "raw" material. But we get students in our earliest grades who often cannot do any of those three things very well at all. Why was Miss Sayers ignoring that fact? I always chalked it up to the fact that she just wanted to get to the meat of the education process she was proposing and didn't want to get too detailed. Then, in doing some further reading of the "old school" methods, Greek and Roman, as well as Jewish, I came to understand that in those cultures and times, children didn't start formal education until they were seven or eight. Well, what do you know, Miss Sayers wasn't just being lazy—she was reflecting the historical practice of when formal training began!

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The Particular Prospects of the Pre-Polly Stage

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So for millennia, Western cultures have assumed that at about eight years of age children came to some point of maturity that was significantly different than the preceding years. They were now, in some sense, **READY for a specific pedagogy or curriculum of study, even if not the Trivium.** (I haven't researched the American Baptist's reason for identifying eight as the age of accountability—maybe it would have strengthened my argument.)

So let's look at this age group, age 5-7 years. A slight tangent may be necessary here, though. As I stated a moment ago, most historical systems of formal education began at about eight years old. In the United States, our systems of education have adopted five or six as the age to begin. The practice of teaching a "kindergarten" (German for child's garden) comes out of Prussia and Germany in the last century. German-Americans brought the practice to the United States. In the "old country" the students began this form of semi-formal training at

about four or five years old. So here we are: as private schools we have many choices, one of them being when and how we start our program. Do we buck the adopted tradition and expect the parents to teach their children to read, write, and cipher at home, then begin the Trivium at about eight, or second grade? That is an option.

I don't believe the Scriptures give us an age, as much as an attitude and principle regarding teaching our children. Deuteronomy 6 makes it clear that educating our children is a 24-hour-a day job, beginning at birth. So, if

parents think their educational responsibility ends after five or eight years and then they can pass it off to a school, they're wrong either way. If schools think they can assume control of the child or his education when he's either five or eight, they are wrong. Conventional wisdom and long-term practice seem to indicate that a child can adapt well to formal training at five years old, whether that's at home or in a home-respecting school and is not an issue for this time. We represent schools, so I will work from that standpoint.

Characteristics: how Pre-Polly children differ from their "full" grammar brethren. Obviously, the basic characteristics that will come to full-bloom around eight, are present in an undeveloped form in these little guys. That is, they are already imitators, able to recall and recite material without much diffi-

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culty. Our first daughter, Carolyn, was "reading" the story of Sleeping Beauty at two years old, after our reading it to her about a zillion times. So that grammatical ability is there to be used to some extent in kindergarten. But what are some other characteristics that are very evident in K-2, that then tend to diminish after 2nd grade?

The biggest difference is their reliance on their **senses.** Like very little children, from which these students are just emerging, touching, tasting, seeing, hearing all are like six-lane highways speeding loads of information

to their minds. Later on, seeing and hearing will play the larger roles, but at this Pre-Polly stage, they need to move their hands, their bodies, they want to see while listening. All six lanes are moving so why not make use of them to get the material through from lots of connected roads?

Another big difference is the **speed at which their little bodies are changing.** I am always amazed at how little the kindergartners look at the beginning of the year, and how much more mature they appear by May. I am not a doctor, but from years of watching (and living with) these little guys, it seems that their physical changes slow down a bit after eight. They still grow, but not quite so obviously in every way. They get lost in the bathroom in September but have confident self-assurance in checking out of the room in April.

Not the last difference by any means, but one I personally like the best and which has great potential for teaching practices is what I call the **Amazement Factor.** This is the window of opportunity, sort of framed by the ages of 5 - 7, in which you can "wow" these guys. Others

may call it the sense of wonder—that sounds better—but it's still fun to go for the amazement level. The saucer-sized eyes, the sharp intake of breath, the slack-jawed mouth—it's a real challenge but worth the work. The Pre-Polly stage kids exhibit it regularly. They are excited to learn in a way that makes their teachers want to stick with that level for years. The excitement changes to a more reasoned, mature level by about third grade. Still good, but contained. The potential for good use of this sense of wonder, easy excitement, and sensory input is profound. *(to be continued Jan. 2006)*

Tom Garfield is superintendent of Logos School in Moscow, ID. Logos is currently celebrating its 25th year of operation. He is married to Julie and they are the parents of four Logos graduates and the grandparents of a grandson.