An Investigation of Students' Perceptions of Classical and Christian Education at Selected Classical and Christian Schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate students' perceptions of their classical Christian education in selected schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. The aim of the study was to focus on students' perceptions at different intervals of their classical Christian school experience. These intervals included high school freshman, high school senior, college, and career levels. The sample consisted of 37 participants from three regional classical Christian schools; participants ranged in age from 14 - 26 years old. Data were collected using focus group interview sessions and were analyzed inductively using Cresswell's (2013) six-step approach for qualitative data analysis. This process included organizing data, reading data, coding data, describing themes, narrating themes, and interpreting results. The results yielded four global themes: (a) the importance of relationships; (b) spiritual formation; (c) academic preparation; (d) enjoyment of education. These themes provide insight for classical Christian school stakeholders concerning both the positive and negative perceptions of students. A conclusion of the study is a healthy response to students' voices will provide schools with an opportunity to serve their students at a higher level within the overall pursuit of classical Christian school paideia. Future research should include how students' perceptions may change as enrollment increases. In addition, future studies are needed to ascertain students' perceptions of their enjoyment of a classical Christian education.

Keywords: classical Christian education, trivium, paideia, grammar, logic, rhetoric, perceptions

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife, Michelle. You have made many sacrifices to afford me the opportunity to pursue a lifelong journey of learning; your love, encouragement, and prayers have sustained me through many obstacles and opportunities. None of this is possible without you.

To my parents, thank you for placing me on the path of education. Outside of your unwavering Christian faith, nothing had a more profound impact on me than your encouragement to pursue higher education. The words of a parent to a child are, in some ways, unknowable in terms of impact. Please know these words, from you to me, have left their mark: "Get an education; no one can ever take that away from you." I am fully aware that my opportunity to pursue education has been, in many ways, a fulfillment of your dreams for your children.

To my children, it is my hope you will grow to love learning as much as I have. But most of all, it is my prayer you know and learn of Christ. As Paul says of Christ, in Colossians 1: 15 – 17, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." It is my desire to see your classical Christian education keep this truth in front of you. It really is all about Christ.

Acknowledgments

Any educational endeavor begins with exemplary teachers, and any lasting educational process is an overt act of love. To teach is to sacrifice. It is also to care deeply about the well being and learning of another person. In this sense, I am extremely grateful for the chair of my doctoral dissertation process, Dr. Mark Dula. Your care and concern for my learning process was beyond what I, or anyone, could have expected. As a teacher, you have made a profound impact on my life. In addition, I want to thank my other dissertation committee members, Dr. Hilton-Prillhart and Dr. Kariuki. You both challenged me to learn and to grow in new ways, and because of you, I am better equipped to be a scholar and leader. I am quite certain the enjoyment of my learning was due to who you are as people. Thank you.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the elementary faculty of Providence Academy. In many ways, you have "shared" me with the demands of this part of my own educational journey. Thank you for your prayers and your support. I hope what I have learned will help you in your own efforts to provide students with an excellent classical Christian education.

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Chapter 1

Classical and Christian education in the United States is, in many ways, as old as the founding of the country. Teachers in the early years of the United States were often oriented toward instructing students in theology, literature, and classical languages (House, 2011). However, as the needs of the country changed, approaches to education followed suit. Many of the "signatures" of a distinctly classical and Christian education disappeared from the educational milieu within the country. Recent years, though, have seen a resurgence in classical and Christian education. Ian Lindquist, the executive director of the Public Interest Fellowship, notes in *Classical Schools in Modern America* (2020) that the Association for Classical Christian Schools (ACCS) now boasts more than 300 schools and over 40,000 students (p. 3). This surge of interest in classical and Christian education (CCE) has led to more families, particularly Christian families, gaining an awareness of CCE as a viable educational option. In the main, these schools are often viewed as emphasizing academic rigor and spiritual relevance while placing less emphasis on standardized test scores.

When considering the potential benefits or challenges of classical and Christian education, questions about the use of a dead language, Latin, as a core pillar of knowledge in the K - 12 setting, and questions around the suitability of more traditional learning have proliferated as classical and Christian schools have gained influence. Specifically at the upper middle school and high school level of education, students experiencing CCE are asked to learn the task of translating Latin while reading older works of literature rooted in the traditions of Western civilization. CCE proponents, such as Terrence O. Moore (2016) of the Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative, claim that this approach can develop in students greater critical and

creative thinking capabilities than other modern forms of education. Moreover, CCE is often promoted as a pathway to help students in their overall love of learning, and in many educational circles, the love for learning is presented as a key missing element of educational success; classical educator Douglas Wilson (2003) in *The Case for Classical Christian Education* notes while some models of education want "students to enjoy *themselves*; the older classical model wants students to be disciplined so that they come to enjoy their *work*" (p. 154). Therefore, the potential tension between some of the tenets of CCE (Latin, rote memorization, religious education, and text-based inquiry) and other forms of education that are more constructivist in nature is a core element of differentiation for proponents of the CCE movement.

One of the main organizational engines for the classical and Christian school movement in the United States, the Association for Classical Christian Schools (ACCS), recently published a seminal report in January of 2020 which outlines the growing influence of CCE for Christian parents and students in the categories of life choices, preparation, attitudes, values, opinions, and practices (Goodwin, 2020). The study is a comparative analysis of CCE's impact on K - 12 students versus other school settings: public, secular private, evangelical, Catholic, and religious home-based. The study focuses on CCE alumni within an age range of 24 - 42. The study's overarching theme is rhetorical, as it presents a worldview of the superior nature and outcome of distinctly CCE for Christian parents seeking the best possible education for their children. For example, one major conclusion of the study is CCE alumni "are the most prepared for college and have a healthy outlook on life" (Goodwin, 2020, p. 52). This conclusion provides support, the authors argue, for the long-term viability of CCE in American communities, and the primary target audience of the study is parent centric. The conclusions of the study point to CCE as the *best* choice for Christian parents.

Supporting the view of CCE as an optimal choice for Christian parents are the academic performance competencies displayed by graduates from classical Christian K - 12 schools. ACCS student scores on ACT and SAT have averaged in the top 5% to 10% nationally; parents of ACCS students largely attribute this type of success to the academic rigor presented within the school setting (Vaughan & Morgan, 2015). While classical Christian education is not marked by a commitment to outcome-based standardized testing, it is argued that the process of dense reading and consistent writing will produce students who perform well on standardized tests. Therefore, parents investigating the benefits of a faith-based education for their children may perceive CCE as a best option for both academic excellence and spiritual formation.

The potential need to bridge the gap between the desire of some Christian parents to send their children to a classical Christian school and students' perceptions of the educational benefits of CCE is evidenced by the popularity, with CCE circles, of Rebekah Merkle's (2017) book *Classical Me Classical Thee: Squander Not Thine Education*. Merkle wrote the book as a type of *post-classical Christian education* exposé on what students may not realize, in terms of value and purpose, concerning the education they are currently experiencing. As a former student within the framework of CCE, Merkle's ethos, or character of the speaker, is designed to encourage students in their current perceptions of their education by highlighting the future benefits (Merkle, 2017). Concerning this gap in parent selection of CCE and students' perceptions of their CCE, Merkel wrote:

> I don't suppose that sometime in your early youth you sat down and read through a series of books discussing educational styles and decided that classical ed looked like the best option. It's possible that your parents may have done that with you . . . but realistically, you are at this school because your parents were sold on the vision of

> education, not because you were. This whole education thing is not something you chose, it's something being done to you. And when you were little, you never questioned it. But now that you're old enough to make your own choices in other areas (I'm assuming your mother doesn't pick out your outfit every day), it may have occurred to you to wonder what the point of all of this is (Merkle, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Merkle's argument addressed the potential of some students to lack understanding, in their current perceptions of their education, of the future benefits. While this may be a reality for all forms of education, the distinctive elements and challenging nature of CCE may be more intense for students in classical Christian schools. As Merkle (2017) noted, the educational experiences of students within CCE are not chosen by students; these experiences are selected by parents for the purpose of current and future educational benefit.

Merkle's ultimate purpose was to *alter* students' present perceptions of their education by highlighting, in an overt way, the *value* of their educational experiences. Concerning the privilege of CCE, Merkle (2017) wrote "if you could pause for a moment and really grasp the significance of what you're receiving, it might just change the way you think about all of the work you have to do every day" (pp. 12-13). Embedded within the author's rhetorical presentation concerning value appropriation is the presupposition of the amount and value of academic workperformed by students in classical and Christian schools. In short, what she addressed is the perception that this specific type of education is *worth it*.

Finally, many parents desire a strong Christian and moral educational foundation for their students; this reality, as a potential benefit, may outweigh other academic considerations for Christian parents (Wilson, 2003, p. 67). As more parents select this type of educational experience and more students move through this educational process, it is essential to ascertain

how *students* in distinctly classical and Christian schools *perceive* the benefits or challenges of this type of education.

Statement of the Problem

A core value in education is the consideration of what is best for the *student* (Levin, 2005). Emerging classical Christian schools have a core commitment to educational values which are philosophical, such as the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness, while holding to certain pedagogical beliefs such as Latin instruction and Dorothy Sayers more modern trivium-based educational model of the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages of learning (Sayers, 1947). These philosophical and pedagogical beliefs are sometimes rhetorically persuasive as parents consider placing their children in distinctly classical and Christian K - 12 schools. Parents are persuaded that a classical and Christian school education is the best option for their children.

However, it is important to note that little research has been conducted *on students'* perceptions of the classical and Christian education they are receiving. More qualitative research, which allows for rich, thick description of students' experiences, is needed. Also, school leaders at the administrative and board level have a keen interest in gaining greater insight into how students perceive classical and Christian education's distinct nature. Classical and Christian school leaders who are committed to this model of education hold, from a leadership perspective, the tension between the tenets of CCE and student satisfaction with the educational environment. This may be due, in part, to the constant need for leaders in classical and Christian schools to either grow or maintain enrollment. While parents are decision-makers for the educational opportunity within the private school domain, it may also be true that students function as a locus of control, to varying degrees, for where and how they receive the educational opportunity. This scenario is especially true for older students who have more ability to articulate their academic

interests. Therefore, CCE leaders are well served to obtain qualitative data that originates from students.

While interest in the movement has increased in recent years, the target audience, within the framing of the larger population of students in the United States, is still categorically small. This study aims to allow student representatives from small and distinctly classical and Christian schools to tell their stories concerning their educational training. The research will focus on three classical and Christian high schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. This research study intends to provide a qualitative description of the emerging perceptions of students studying the classical and Christian canon in Grades Nineand Twelve and their perceptions of prior classical and Christian educational experiences beyond the high school years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of their classical and Christian education. Specifically, the study sought to capture educational perceptions at the freshman and senior levels of education and students' perceptions of their earlier education after advancing to early college and career. On a macro-level, this study aimed to provide students with a platform to share their thoughts and tell their *lived* stories concerning their education.

It is also important to note that this type of research provides much-needed insight for school leaders into students' perceptions within the specific theater of classical and Christian education work and life preparation. Specifically, CCE school leaders and professional educators who desire to gain more insight into how students perceive preparation for academic and work pursuits. Also, this study was designed to gain qualitative data on the spiritual impact of

Christian education. Overall, the study's purpose was to focus on gathering this qualitative data from high school students in grades Nine through Twelve, followed by qualitative data, via focus group interviews and individual interviews, with college and career level graduates. Merriam &Tisdell (2017) noted that rich qualitative research provides a great opportunity to enhance understanding and improve experiences for those studied.

Finally, this research provides an opportunity to investigate student perceptions of their CCE beyond a data-driven narrative of academic success or failure. This studyprovided actual qualitative data from current CCE students and graduates. The student focus group interviews and individual interviews provided an understanding from the unique and collective experiences of students.

Research Question

What are students' perceptions of classical and Christian education?

Significance of the Study

In a 2019 study concerning student's perceptions of classical and Christian education, researcher Robert Mitchell recommended parents keep their children in distinctly classical and Christian schools because they can "trust that their students will receive a rigorous, academic, Kingdom-focused education" (p. 158). However, this raises issues of trust, which is rooted more in the perceptions of parents rather than the students' actual lived experiences. This study allowed students to tell their own stories concerning their classical and Christian educational experiences. While students in individual schools may give "feedback" in both formal and informal ways to school leaders, this type of systematic inquiry and data coding provides an opportunity to see if any broader themes develop from the testimony of receiving a

very distinct type of education. Also, the interest of the participating schools is oriented toward growing their knowledge base of students' perceptions of classical and Christian education in relation to continuous school improvement in a very contemporary sense: the project culminated in the spring of 2021.In addition to this localized significance, other classical and Christian schools may glean leadership insight into classical Christian education's product and student needs.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study. The researcher has defined terms that are not cited.

Classical Christian Education: Classical Christian education, in its modern form, is a systematic approach to education rooted in several salient characteristics. In terms of methodology, this education model implements an instructional taxonomy of the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages of learning that correlate with assumed stages of student development. As such, classical and Christian education strives for the inculcation of wisdom and virtue via an emphasis on discovering that which is true, good, and beautiful. In terms of content, distinctly classical and Christian education is guided by the great works, classical languages (Latin), and disciplines found in the Western tradition (Perrin, 2004). The classical approach's entirety is encased in a Christian worldview and gospel-centered application so students may know, glorify, and enjoy God.

Grammar: The grammar stage of learning is characterized by rote memorization, phonics, mastery-based learning techniques, songs, chants, skill and drill approaches, investigational learning, and multiple writing forms. The grammar stage is roughly outlined as grades K - Five.

Logic: Logic stage learning is rooted in increasing student's skills in formal and informal critical thinking, debate, Aristotelian logic, persuasive writing, scientific inquiry, and public speaking. The logic stage is correlated with Grades Sixthrough Eight.

Rhetoric: The rhetoric stage of learning focuses on polish in the presentation in both the written and spoken words and sophisticated critical thinking and primary text-based skills.

Paideia: The educational philosophy and methodology of the ancient Greeks which "sought to instill within students a love for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty" (Turley, 2015, p. 19). In Christian school application, *paideia* refers to the belief that people are "created in the image of God in order to respond to the diaphanous cosmos that reveals God's Truth, Goodness, and Beauty" (Turley, 2014, p. 34).

Trivium: A tri-level K - 12 modern classical learning taxonomy which includes the grammar (K -Five), logic (Six-Nine), and rhetoric (Ten-Twelve) stages of learning.

Student Perceptions: The thoughts and beliefs of students concerning their educational experiences and activities.

Limitations of the Study

Of the three schools selected for this study, one had no graduates yet in the workforce post earning a college degree. Also, another participating school had very few interviewees available from the college years or post-college years. In both cases, this limitation was due to each school's developmental nature as a start-up entity. One participating school only had enough college graduates to accommodate a personal interview (not focus group interaction).

Organization of the Study

Chapter One provides a general introduction to the study followed by a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, an overarching research question, a significance of the study, a

list of definitions, and an outline of limitations of the study. Chapter Two includes relevant literature for the overall framework of classical and Christian education (CCE) and the limited studies concerning students' perceptions of CCE. Chapter Two is divided into five main sections: a historical and a contemporary overview of CCE, trivium-based education, educational paideia, and studies concerning student perceptions of CCE. Chapter Three presents the qualitative procedures and methodology employed to gather data for coding and analysis. The subsequent coding and analysis results are outlined and explained in Chapter Four. Chapter Five provides the culmination of the study via an overall summary of findings, conclusions, discussion, recommendations for CCE, and suggestions for future study.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This research aims to investigate students' perceptions of their classical and Christian education (CCE). Therefore, Chapter Two of this study provides a thorough investigation of the seminal literature relevant to the study's overall purpose. Chapter Two is organized into five major sections: a historical overview of CCE, a contemporary overview of CCE, trivium-based education, educational paideia, and research studies specific to perceptions of CCE.

The recent nature of CCE as an overall movement in the United States yielded few studies specific to students' perceptions of CCE. As a result, the first portion of this literature review is dedicated to the historical, pedagogical, and philosophical underpinnings of CCE. These core areas are the constants that give rise to students' experiences and perceptions in distinctly classical and Christian schools.

Historical Overview of Classical and Christian Education

Classical Christian education leader Christopher Perrin (2004) has noted the term classical education "begs for some definition" (p. 6). The necessity of explanation is most often rooted in a general understanding of what parents and students already perceive to be true concerning Christian education. Parents and students may have more *scaffolding* for Christian education. At a basic level, most families seeking to learn more about CCE have a sense that religious education is a major part of a classical Christian school's educational curriculum and environment. However, parents and students often have less cognitive awareness of what constitutes a classical education.

Perrin wrote (2004) classical education at its core is the "authoritative, traditional and enduring form of education, begun by the Greeks and Romans, developed through history and

now being renewed and recovered in the 21st century" (p. 6). Therefore, classical education is as old as Greco-Roman civilization. Perrin also noted that, while there is obviously some variation within the educational process for these ancient cultures, there is an essential homogeneity in providing an education that included "grammar, literature, logic, and rhetoric" (p. 6).

Philosophically, this ancient form of classical education contained what classical educator Stephen Turley (2014) noted as "cosmic, anthropological, and civic frames of reference" (p. 19). At the cosmic level, classical education was deeply concerned with making *meaning* of the surrounding world, and a presupposition of the educational model was that the world included inherent meaning. Moreover, the sphere of the human person in the cosmos was to find harmony with the cosmos and with others. In this sense, classical education has valued the overarching questions of humanity's place and purpose in the broader world. Practically, the classical form of education has labored to introduce students to the literature and history of the Western world to root students in a worldview of purpose in their responsibilities to learning and community. Therefore, a natural extension of classical education is the theme of intellectual humility concerning the great questions of the ages. Students educated in a distinctly classical form should possess a well-developed sense of the broader questions of meaningful existence: Who am I? Why am I here? Is there a larger purpose and meaning to life? As stated by classicist E. Christian Kopff in his work entitled *The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition* (2001), "anyone who cannot explain how his situation of today relates to his deeds of yesterday will not be able to understand the connection between the self he once was and his present self" (p. 11). As a result, this education model promotes a facility with the great works of the Western tradition, and this connection to the past provides a framework for students to interact with their present.

While there is some variation of opinion concerning what must be included in the canon of classical education, classical educators have affirmed the existence of great works of literature and intellectual inquiry within the Western tradition, which form the content of a classically driven education. Therefore, classical education cannot be divorced from a prescriptive content that forms the basis of understanding the universal human condition (Kopff, 2001, p. 15). Parents and students often view the literature, history, and philosophy offerings of classical education as *traditional* in both scope and sequence. Kopff noted a *great books* curriculum "may begin to produce in the student that sure mark of intellectual maturity, the recognition that tradition is a fruitful thing, not a lifeless, dry assortment of historical detritus" (p. 16). However, it must be noted the classical canon also included instruction in the ancient languages of Greek and Latin, and some classical educators see a connection between the removal of these language requirements as a precursor to the removal of classical education overall. Cheryl Lowe (2021), founder of Memoria Press and a popular publisher of materials for classical Christian schools, has indicated that Latin study is the root of a rich and concentrated Western tradition that connects all areas of study (p. 19). In this sense, there is a conviction within the historical classical tradition of language study's importance beyond utilitarian benefits. This broader historical view of classical education assumes no need to prove the importance of ancient language study; the assumption is built into classical education's superstructure (Kopff, 2001).

While study of Latin and Greek is present in today's classical Christian schools, it must be noted that the historically classical schools of the 19th century across Europe did not merely offer classical languages, such as Latin, as one area of study among a plethora of other subjects. In contrast, Shawn Barnett outlined, in his essay entitled *Why a Classical Education is Almost Impossible Today* (2019), the pedagogical approach of classical schools in prior centuries which

required up tofifteen hours of study in classical languages. In this sense, historical CCE is differentiated from most modern schools in the classical Christian model.Modern representations offer Latin as a subject area of study; however, Latin is not assigned more time or attention than other areas of study. Moreover, time allocation is not the only distinction. While the historical context of CCE was rooted in studying ancient works in original languages, modern classical Christian schools within associations such as the Association for Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) and the Society for Classical Learning (SCL) tout Latin instruction as a vehicle for better SAT or ACT scores, improved mental dexterity, or enhanced study of Romance languages. Therefore, answering questions around the purpose of the study was more oriented to the facility with and an appreciation of texts in the historical context (Barnett, 2019). This shift may impact student perceptions of the purpose for Latin study.

A broad view of distinctly K - 12 Christian education in recent history can be oriented to Christian parents' growing discontentment in the 70s and 80s. Clark & Johnson &Sloat noted in their seminal work entitled *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future* (1991), many Christian parents "saw religious and moral influences being removed from public schools and began looking for an alternate education for their children" (p. 54). Therefore, Christian parents and church leaders became increasingly interested in developing new schools which would emphasize a biblically-based education. During this time of growth for K - 12 Christian schools, there was some recognition of schools' freedom concerning pedagogical techniques for instruction. However, the overarching purpose of Christian education remained as "building up one another and equipping the church to worship and witness to the world" (p. 59). As a result, some of the Christian school movements in the 70s and 80s received criticism for perceived notions of pushing students toward ministry as a vocation. However, K - 12 Christian schools

were not limited to religious training; Christian schools taught a core educational battery of math, science, history, and English.

Christian education, according to ACCS, placed theology as both the centerpiece and foundation of all scholarly inquiry (ACCS, 2021). Aligned with this vision was the core belief "every experience, every skill, every idea, all knowledge and every creation is only understood in the context of God and His nature" (ACCS, 2021). In this sense, students in ACCS model Christian schools engage with the educational process from the biblical context of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6). In this passage, Hebrew parents are instructed to keep God's commandments, and a portion of this command included parental responsibility for religious education. This section of scripture concluded with:

> Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (English Standard Version, 2001, Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Researcher Robert Todd Mitchell (2018) noted that the belief structure of Christian education "interprets this passage as the passing on of truth from one generation to the next, during the completion of the most mundane tasks of life" (p. 34). The broader implication for ACCS schools is the notion of God's reality being at the center of all study. Therefore, a distinctly Christian school setting aims to provide students with a scriptural foundation for all of life.

The New Testament corollary of Deuteronomy 6 is Ephesians chapter 6, verses 1 - 3:

> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise) that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. Father's do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (English Standard Version, 2001, Ephesians 6: 1-3)

While no mention of education as an institution exists within this passage, ACCS proponents have noted that Christian parents can delegate their responsibility *in loco parentis* (in place of parents) to carry out this command to gospel-centered K - 12 Christian schools (ACCS, 2016). Mitchell (2018) noted Christian families must take responsibility to educate their children and "when faced with such a grand task, Christian families commonly look to find the best tool available in achieving their objective" (p. 34). The expectation of parents and students in a Christian school is a religiously founded educational experience.

Contemporary Overview of Classical and Christian Education

Contemporary CCE proponents have employed various versions of a great books curriculum, and the common thread among the classical Christian school curriculum is a Western-based and traditional reading list. Writer and pastor Douglas Wilson (1996) has noted in *Repairing the Ruins: The Classical and Christian Challenge to Modern Education* the need to guide students to "love the lovely" (p. 174). Therefore, Wilson argued books selected for CCE should meet the standard of universality in scope and recognition. Wilson has supported this view by referencing C.S. Lewis's claim in the work entitled *The Discarded Image* (1964):

> Literature exists to teach what is useful, to honour what deserves honour, to appreciate what is delightful. The useful, honourable, and delightful things are

> superior to it: it exists for their sake; its own use honour, or delightfulness is a derivative of theirs. (p. 214)

The core argument here is that students will perceive they are growing in their love for the honorable and delightful as they read and study the great works of the Western tradition. Therefore, students' reading experiences in classical and Christian schools have a more narrow focus than most other contemporary K - 12 school settings. Also, reading lists in contemporary CCE are often increasingly rigorous for students as they enter the middle school and high school years. Wilson (1996) noted the difficult task of reading dense literature and primary texts has led learners "to dismiss great but difficult literature as poor literature when the deficiencies are in ourselves" (p. 175). However, Wilson has supported his argument for more traditional reading lists, which include some measure of ancient writers such as Homer, Ovid, Isaiah, Aeneas, Horace, Jeremiah, Aeschylus, Solomon, Sophocles, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Dante, Cervantes, Milton, Bunyan, and Whitman, by again quoting C.S. Lewis (1965) in his work entitled *An Experiment in Criticism*:

> But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, I transcend; and am never more myself than when I do. (p. 141)

In this sense, the core distinctive for students within a CCE reading curriculum was noted by Wilson as being formative; the literature students are reading is creating who they are becoming (Wilson, 1996, p. 176).

The result of this approach to literature instruction in classical Christian schools is a lack of contemporary literature. Wilson noted contemporary literature as beholden to more modern

schools of philosophical thought, which cannot be appreciated without understanding the past. As such, contemporary literature is "plagued by our modern relativism, the stampedes of faddishness, and the supreme chutzpah of publishing blurbs (Wilson, 1996, p. 175). This literary worldview is at odds with the notion of developing a love for reading in students wherever it may be found; the hope students will eventually find their way to a more traditional canon of literature is abandoned in favor of a more prescriptive approach.

Classical Christian school graduate and author Rebekah Merkle delineated the difference between *what* is taught as a great books program in classical Christian schools and *how* students are asked to interact with texts. She noted that the student experience of extended focus on the actual meaning of texts is a critical skill for students as they progress toward college (2017, p. 49). Merkle presented a bifurcation of classical and modern education based on a slight variation of meaning-based questions within the literature classroom. Moderns may have oriented questions around what a text means to the *reader* while a classical Christian educator may have oriented questions to what the text means; the assumption was "the author had something in particular in mind when he wrote, and your jobis to find out what that is" (p. 50). Therefore, students educated in this tradition, proponents argue, may develop well-trained minds in text investigation. This connection between a great books curriculum and text investigation is an attempt, within CCE circles, to turn around the "lost practice of and taste for reading" (Bloom, 1987, p. 62).

An important work found within the humanities teacher training program (and beyond the humanities) in many classical Christian schools is an edited and augmented reprinting of John Milton Gregory's 1886 work *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (2006). The book outlined, for new

teachers entering CCE as a profession, seven facets every good teacher must embrace for pedagogical success:

1. A teacher must be one who knows the lesson, truth, or skill taught
2. A learner is one who pays attention with interest to the lesson
3. The language used as a medium between the teacher and student must be common to both
4. The lesson to be learned must be explained in terms of knowledge already known by the former – the unknown must be explained by the known
5. Teaching is arousing and using the learner's mind to grasp the desired concept, thought, or skill
6. Learning is thinking into one's own understanding a new idea, truth, or skill
7. The test and proof of teaching done – the finishing and securing process – must be a reviewing, rethinking, re-knowing, reproducing, and applying of the knowledge taught (pp. 8 - 9)

Tom Spenser, one of the founding leaders of the classical and Christian *Logos School* in Idaho, described the importance of Gregory's seven laws as having preeminence in training, developing, and evaluating teachers within their school setting (Spenser, 1996, pp. 114 - 115). This is important as student classroom experiences may have been impacted across the United States due to the influential nature of *LogosSchool* as an early adopter of both CCE and Gregory's educational theory. The hegemonic impact of Gregory's thoughts on teaching is evidenced by the dominant organizational structure of CCE, the Association for Classical and Christian Schools, advancing through its website and conferences using Gregory's work as a primary teacher education tool (ACCS, 2021).

Beyond the great books and Gregory's S*even Laws* as a curriculum guide in the humanities, contemporary CCE has organized itself via two primary leadership organizations: The Association for Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) and The Society for Classical Learning (SCL). Notably, ACCS has developed an accreditation process that is growing in recognition across the United States. According to ACCS, their accreditation program has been designed to help schools sharpen their focus on classical content and pedagogy (ACCS, 2021). Some of the tenets of accreditation in this evaluation paradigm include a robust Latin program, great books curriculum, and trivium-based education. Moreover, ACCS has also made its own testing program, the Classical Learning Test, as an alternative to the more traditional ACT or SAT college admission test. Like-minded ACCS schools have gathered for several years to attend summer conferences, accreditation meetings, and training workshops to further their worldview of a contemporary form of CCE for students in the United States. The goal of these efforts is to standardize the classical Christian educational experience for students.

The Society for Classical Learning (SCL) has listed its mission and vision as "fostering human flourishing by making classical Christian education thrive" (SCL, 2020). Like ACCS, SCL stated a core value of passing along Western heritage via focused study on the voices of the past. Connected to the SCL mission is a desire to ensure "the great heritage of Western civilization is preserved, cherished, and handed on to the next generation" (SCL, 2020). This core value is stated as a prominent feature of contemporary CCE; the presupposition is the broader American culture has lost its connection to a rich Western tradition. Therefore, the student experience is presented as one who is serious about saving Western civilization.

Trivium-Based Education

In simple form, trivium-based education in modern classical Christian schools presents an educational taxonomy of grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages. The root of this portion of the modern movement in CCE is Dorothy Sayers' (1947) essay entitled *The Lost Tools of Learning.* Sayers presented in her essay a belief, which assigned the fundamental problem of modern education to a lamentable failure to teach students the art of critical thinking (p. 6). Sayers' writing concerning a modern trivium-based education to rectify this problem has become a dominant portion of both the marketing and the educational experiences of ACCS and SCL schools. While the creation of critical thinkers constitutes one of CCE's main outcomes, the *distinct pedagogy* of the endeavor is delivered via the tri-level approach to education. Sayers argued every academic discipline has a grammar, logic, and rhetoric component; Sayers also presented these three stages of development as "the Poll-parrot, the Pert, and the Poetic—the latter coinciding, approximately, with the onset of puberty" (p. 10). A core idea presented is the belief these stages of learning, when taught in the proper scope and sequence with the proper pedagogical approach, "children will enjoy what they do, and what they do equips them with the tools of learning" (Wilson,1991, p. 92). The words *enjoyment* and *equipped* are critical terms in the polemical nature of explaining CCE. It is argued, by Wilson, that the trivium approachaccomplishes much of what has frustrated modern education: the failure to appropriately meet students where they are in their development as learners.

The first section of trivium-based education, the grammar stage (Poll-parrot), targets K - Five students. The main learning activities of this stage of learning are memorization, chants, songs, and mastery learning (Spencer, 1996a, p. 94). It is claimed students in this age range love to learn in this fashion, and the content and pedagogy are built toward "teaching with the grain"

in the lower grades (Wilson, 1991, p. 92). This accumulation of facts, figures, and content of multiple academic disciplines is intended to build a foundation for the learning stages which follow. However, it is essential to note Sayers' fundamental argument for Latin instruction beginning in the early years of grammar education:

> I will say at once, quite firmly, that the best grounding for education is the Latin grammar. I say this, not because Latin is traditional and mediæval, but simply because even a rudimentary knowledge of Latin cuts down the labor and pains of learning almost any other subject by at least 50 percent. It is the key to the vocabulary and structure of all the Romance languages and to the structure of all the Teutonic languages, as well as to the technical vocabulary of all the sciences
> and to the literature of the entire Mediterranean civilisation, together with all its historical documents. (Sayers, 1947, p. 11)

Of note for contemporary CCE here is the foundation of Latin study as a transitive property; Latin grammar is said to help with vocabulary acquisition, Romance language development, and science instruction. This argument, aimed to benefit students as learners beyond the scope of Latin instruction for the sake of Western tradition, is more utilitarian. However, learning is very oriented to rote memorization at the grammar stage, even in Latin instruction.

The logic (Pert) stage of learning within CCE roughly coincides with Grades Six through Eight. The markers of this stage of learning are argumentation and questioning. In many ACCS and SCL schools, students are introduced to Aristotelian logic during this stage of learning. Sayers (1947) noted the logic stage of learning presented an opportunity for students to move from vocabulary, in language arts, to analysis and the logical construction of speech; writing instruction becomes oriented toward argumentative writing; math instruction focuses more on

the logic of math (p. 15). In short, this stage of CCE represented the application of acquired knowledge to the greater application of critical thought. Wilson noted (1991) "as children mature, they tend to use information learned in the course of their studies in disputation" (p. 94). Practically, students' classroom experiences are rooted in rigorous debate, discussion, logic, and questioning. Author and classical professor Dan Sheffler (2021) noted in his essay, *The Surprising Logic of the World*, beneath these pedagogical tools of the logic stage are beliefs about the world around us; beliefs which begin with logical convictions concerning both "intelligible principles" and searches for knowledge which are mysterious to us (p. 33).

As the final portion of trivium-based education, the rhetoric stage of learning (Poetic) is marked by what Aristotle labeled as studying the available means of persuasion (Aristotle, 1954). Therefore, if students have learned the *principles and parts* ofargumentation and logic in the logic stage, at the rhetoric stage they are learning how to write, argue, speak, and judge with winsome grace. The student experience at this stage of learning, which roughly correlates with grades Nine through Twelve, is characterized by Sayers as moving beyond rote memorization (grammar) and analysis (logic) to understanding deeper truths:

> The doors of the storehouse of knowledge should now be thrown open for them to browse about as they will. The things once learned by rote will now be seen in new contexts; the things once coldly analyzed can now be brought together to form a new synthesis; here and there a sudden insight will bring about that most exciting of all discoveries: the realisation that a truism is true. (Sayers, 1947, p. 17)

This last part of trivium-based education's practical learning activities are scored discussion, Socratic seminar, multiple writing modes, thesis writing, extended public speaking, creative problem solving, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning.

These trivium-based paradigms of learning form the basis for how students perceive the education they are receiving in either positive, negative, or neutral experiences. While classical Christian schools may vary on the finer points of content selection or the number of classical activities applied, all claim the trivium taxonomy in some form. In addition to these learning stages and modalities, Wilson (1991) noted that the stated purpose of trivium-based education is enclosed by a Christian worldview which denies neutrality in any subject area of study (p. 97). If God exists, there are ramifications for all educational endeavors; the Christian worldview shapes the worldview of students, learning, and school community.

Educational Paideia

While questions of content and pedagogy shape much of the student experience within CCE, neither domain fully answers the question of *what* is the telos or stated end of providing a uniquely classical and Christian education to students. Any full manifestation of CCE's telos must include a Christianized version of the Greek concept of *paideia*. Author Stephen R. Turley (2014) outlined in *Awakening Wonder: A Classical Guide to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* the core Greek philosophy of *paideia*. According to Turley, the concept of *paideia*, as an educational model,flourished in the fourth century BC Greek culture by cultivating a type of *formational* education that aimed to bring the hearts and minds of students into harmony with the cosmos and their soul.This type of cosmic and human piety was "embedded particularly in the texts of Homer and Hesiod," which would form students to participate in the Greek city state or *polis* as flourishing humans (p. 11). Therefore, a core component of *paideia* as an educational model was tethered to building community and civilization. Also, *paideia* carried the tri-level pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty as a common goal. The cultivation of these domains was intrinsic in nature. The Christian educational approach to *paideia* has borrowed from this tradition in order

to understand "the cosmos is now redeemed in Christ who evokes an ardent desire – a love – for God in the human person, who is drawn back into fellowship with God through contemplating the divine attributes of the true, the good, and the beautiful" (p. 34). As a result, the Christian concept of *paideia* does not find expression in the *polis* but instead has found expression in the *church*. In terms of how students in classical Christian schools perceive this type of educational inculcation of Christian worldview, the hope of many CCE proponents is a student experience of spiritual enrichment (p. 48).

Researcher Jared L. Squires (2019) developed a dissertation study to address the question of how students in classical Christian schools "described their lived experiences of Christian paideia" (p. 30). This phenomenological study found, via qualitative data gleaned from open-ended interviews of students attending a classical Christian school, salient characteristics of success in students' recognition of their affections turning toward the pursuit of the true, good, and beautiful; moreover, the study yielded conclusions of a Christ-centered lens for students concerning their spiritual and educational development (p. 169). For example, Squires noted in his research a theme of relational intimacy among students. Also, the study found the influence of intentional Christian *paideia* within the academic experiences of students; these classroom experiences included a "vast array of issues . . . discussed in the classical Christian classrooms, both historical and modern, and biblical theology was the instrument used to navigate students towards objective truth" (p. 170).

While the concept of Christian paideia presented to parents seeking CCE for their students was a distinctive marketing model, the everyday student perception of the process was, according to Squires, based in faculty modeling of Christian sacrifice and love. This robust finding pointed to the impact of Christian paideia within the affective domain of student

learning. The long-reaching influence of Christian paideia was also noted in its manifestation in former students' adult lives. Students receiving this type of education reported their belief in how Christian paideia shaped within them a comprehensive biblical worldview which translated to all spheres of their lives: academic, career, relationships, and family (p. 171).

Douglas Wilson (1996) wrote, "Some worldview education, in seeing that the individuality and subjectivism of *pietism* has had a truly destructive impact on Christian culture, have adopted the additional and mistaken belief that *personalpiety* is also to be rejected" (p. 35). However, in their personal spiritual lives, qualitative data in the Squires study (2019) found students affirmed their perceptions of transformation due to Christian paideia in their school setting. Students expressed a greater sense of *personal piety* due to the formational nature of their education in a classical Christian school (p. 172). It is also important to note that Squires discovered the importance of family and parental involvement in Christian paideia; personal piety expressed by students was a part of the ongoing support of parents toward students and the school setting as a whole (p. 177).

Finally, in a dissertation study on CCE and the formation of Christian character, researcher Melody Kay Smith (2020) affirmed the power of CCE to foster in students the spiritual fortitude to live a Christian life in modern culture; this finding was of particular importance to parents as an objective outcome (p. 146). However, as a conclusion in her study, Smith also noted the need for Christian schools to teach students philosophies that were not Christian as part of the overall educational experience; this approach created students' spiritual robustness. In addition, such an approach to Christian paideia presupposed a core commitment to a strong faith foundation (p. 148).

Contemporary Studies and Literature

While there is a deficit of literature specifically related to students' perceptions of CCE, ACCS has recently supplied a seminal study entitled *Good Soil: A Comparative Study of ACCS Alumni Life Outcomes* (2020). The study was developed via a partnership between ACCS and the University of Notre Dame's sociology department.The overarching goal of the study aimed to ascertain the extent to which CCE's goals, Christian paideia and classical training, had impactedstudents from ACCS schools (p. 2). Specifically, the study sought to discover how classical Christian school graduates, ranging in age from 24 - 42 years old, compared to graduates from the public, secular private, Catholic, evangelical Christian, and religious home-based schools. The survey-based comparative study investigated, via surveys sent to a random sampling of former students, seven profile areas for each school setting: college and career, outlook on life, Christian practices, Christian life, traditional and conservative, independent thinkers, and influencers. Each of these study profiles "reflect survey answers about a healthy spiritual life, better life satisfaction, an independence of mind, a commitment to conserving the Western tradition, and the potential to influence culture" (p. 5).

One key thematic finding from the study confirmed a priori beliefs concerning the spiritual value of CCE. A higher percentage of ACCS alumni answered they attended church regularly. Also, survey results noted ACCS alumni were "2.6 times more likely to pray alone and 6.7 times more likely to be readers than students from other K - 12 educational backgrounds" (p. 6). Related to these spiritual findings was the value graduates placed on their religious training as evidenced by a higher percentage of ACCS alumni selecting Christian education for their children. In addition, the research noted ACCS alumni as expressing greater hopefulness and gratefulness in combination with a willingness to serve others sacrificially. The self-report nature

of the survey results is noteworthy due to the connection between what former students identified as their own self-view and worldview of how CCE impacted their spiritual lives in tangible ways.

Within the realm of academic benefits, the study yielded a result of greater ACCS alumni perception of preparedness for college in comparison to students from non ACCS schools; over 80% of ACCS graduates reported they were perfectly prepared or well prepared for the academic challenges of a college or university setting (p. 16). Also, the study's quantitative data showed a greater number of ACCS students completed a bachelor's degree, and many ACCS alumni continued their education and achieved higher degrees, with nearly 90% of ACCS respondents earning their undergraduate degrees. These findings constituted a rhetorical argument, embedded within the study results, of "a more structured educational experience when growing up provides a better completion rate in college" (p. 18). The presupposition of the argument is the distinct process of CCE provided the structure that produced college success's academic outcomes. In short, students *perceived* college readiness and subsequently *achieved* academic success; these outcomes were tied, according to the study, to the influence of CCE.

The Good Soil study (2020) also emphasized parents' perceptions concerning the importance level of a *healthy outlook* on life. It is noted as "perhaps the most important profile as parents think about their children's future" (p. 19). This ACCS alumni perception domain is also arranged as an important outcome from the study, and the positive study results were posited as the natural result of CCE and the process of Christian paideia. For example, the study results showed a positive outcome within the domains of hopefulness and gratitude. Within the category

of hopefulness, researchers ascertained an overall level of hopefulness by asking students if they felt helpless regarding dealing with life's problems. Fewer respondents noted feeling helpless to deal with life's problems than the comparison groups by a significant margin. Also, researchers found ACCS students rated higher in their perceptions of an overall disposition of thankfulness (p. 22).

As a final macro-level category, the study investigated what students perceived as their ability to impact the world. The study combined, as world impact domains, the factors of beliefs, independent thought, and influence; the study results indicated in comparison to other school settings, ACCS students reported or showed an "ability to engage our culture as evidenced through their leadership positions held, greater connection with influential people, and their desire and obligation to engage on social issues" (p. 51). This final finding's rhetorical presentation was designed to persuade future parents of the impact of CCE beyond the K - 12 years. In connection to this persuasion point, the study results were used to fortify the overall argument that CCE has a high return on overall investment for both parents and students (p. 52).

Researcher Robert Todd Mitchell (2019) conducted a phenomenological study that focused on students' perceptions of classical and Christian education. Mitchell's overarching research question was designed to investigate how students described their lived experiences within the CCE setting (p. 26). The qualitative framework utilized for interpreting and describing these student experiences was rooted in Bandura's (1986) predictors of student self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and philosophical response (p. 19). Mitchell gathered data via interviews, focus groups, and personal journals from six participant ACCS schools; eight graduates of ACCS schools participated in the study (2019, p. 67).

The key composite and metaphorical descriptors found in Mitchell' study were students who were "fitted to become assassins trained to slay dragons, dispel darkness, and conquer the realm for their King" (2019, p. 141). This metaphorical description was tethered to the notion of studyparticipants preparing for and living out Christian ideals in all areas of life (p. 147). In this sense, Mitchell's findings are germane to any study of how students perceive the CCE they have received. In the study participants' view, the kingdom focus of their education was meaningful and impactful because it was Christo-centric (p. 148).

Mitchell's study also highlighted how students perceived the specific pedagogy of trivium-based education. Mitchell discovered students "were not only trained by the pedagogy; they were trained in the pedagogy and each were able to articulate convincingly the components and their function" (p. 148). As a result, these student participants believed in a level of metacognition concerning their education experiences; students also perceived their study of Western literature and philosophy served as a strengthening component to their Christian faith (p. 150). In this sense, both the trivium-based approach in mechanics and instruction content was reported as meaningful and formational for students.

A final important observation of Mitchell's study was the participating schools' imperfection with CCE implementation via ACCS standards. Mitchell found while the participating schools were dedicated to reaching the rigorous educational standards outlined by ACCS, in reality, these "accredited schools had systems, integral to trivium-based instruction, that were still very much under development" (p. 151). However, a core finding of the study indicated the participants, though experiencing CCE in schools with varying degrees of developmental maturity perceived their education as superior (p. 153). Also, Mitchell outlined within the implications section of the study the need for a consideration of virtue acquisition

beyond students' perceptions of the practical benefits of a CCE when deciding to stay with CCE; however, the study yielded qualitative data which indicated the student participants valued their educational experiences concerning virtue (p. 158).

Connected to students' perceptions of CCE is the concept of stakeholder motivation within the CCE movement. James Merante (2019) conducted a dissertation case study that aimed to investigate the investment *motivation* of parents, teachers, and school board members within modern classical and Christian schools in America (p. 3). While the study did not target students, the research did produce a picture of stakeholder motivation, leading to students' experiences within CCE circles. Within the broader domain of stakeholder motivation, a sub-question of the study was: "what are the parents', teachers', and school board members' perceptions of the value of their investment in classical Christian education?" (p. 25). To investigate this question, Merante employed a qualitative research design that focused on a single K - 12 ACCS school in the Midwest; qualitative data were collected via interviews and focus groups of fifteen participants.

Concerning stakeholder motivation, Merante (2019) found what was described as an *unexpected* outcome: participant disapproval of mainstream educational philosophy (p. 82). As a qualitative theme, the research indicated "participants wanted to leave a certain philosophy of education rather than, or in combination with, pursuing a school with a classical Christian philosophy" (p. 83). This negative motivation was coded into two main categories: progressive philosophy of education and mainstream philosophy of education; word descriptions of this contemporary educational disapproval were listed as "frustrating" and "indoctrination" (p. 83). While the study presented qualitative evidence of stakeholders' motivation to leave their current

educational settings for something new, the research did not yield any data on how this negative perception may have impacted students' perceptions of the new educational setting.

Another key finding of Merante's research focused on stakeholders' core beliefs concerning CCE. The data indicated several stakeholders "were ignorant of the classical Christian philosophy, but aware that the classical Christian philosophy is different from the philosophies of the prior schools in which they were involved" (2019, p. 85). In connection with the theme of disapproval of contemporary educational philosophy, this finding pointed to stakeholders' motivation as moving away from contemporary education without fully understanding the classical and Christian model of education. A key area of differentiation within this motivational theme was how teachers or parents described their knowledge of CCE versus how administrators articulated CCE. The data presented in the study "indicated that the administration has a higher level of understanding about classical Christian education" (p. 85).

Concerning stakeholders' perceptions, Merante (2019) also found the lack of complete understanding of a classical and Christian model of education did not dissuade stakeholders from embracing a belief in CCE. One parent stakeholder with limited CCE knowledge compared her zeal for CCE to passionate evangelicalism (p. 97). This finding is connected to a three-pronged philosophical presentation for Christian families who approach ACCS schools desiring Christian education: spiritual formation in the home, the local church, and the classical Christian school. Related to this finding, one of Merante's interviewees stated a core appreciation for CCE's "pillars of character, truth, and wisdom and the Christ-centered nature of the school's philosophy" (p. 98). Therefore, while parents in the study did not possess a totalized understanding of CCE, as they viewed and experienced CCE and their students, the current and future benefits were persuasive compared to other educational options.

Merante (2019) also discovered parents were motivated to select CCE for their children because of their perceptions of prior experiences in other educational settings.While this selection process was not described as being systematic, it was a process which included a "core theme of disapproving of mainstream educational philosophy" (p. 101). Connected to this finding was interviewees' perception of the potential *loss* of core Christian doctrine; this concern was related to prior Christian school experiences is which schools planned take government funding; acceptance of funding was viewed as compromising the ability for a school to maintain core Christian doctrines (Merante, 2019).

Researcher Melody K. Smith (2020) investigated the impact of K - 12 CCE on spiritual formation. Smith utilized a qualitative research design of case studies which included interviews, observations, and document investigation to ascertain, as a portion of her research, the "perceived connections, in the cases studied, between classical Christian education and students' Christian formation" (p. 28). The salient findings in the study included perceptions of: (1) the Bible as the source of unchanging truth (2) protection against deception (3) equipment for civil discourse, and (4) wholeness of God's creation (p. 146). These findings were indicative of core distinctives Christian parents are looking for when they select a classical and Christian school setting. Holding to the scriptures as the ultimate source of truth was perceived as a critical factor in constructing a foundational Christian worldview in younger students (Smith, 2020). However, emergent perceptions from the case studies revealed these perceptions were not limited to a strictly theological paradigm that was disconnected from real-world considerations. The study revealed the connection point between Christian worldview considerations and applications, and life was a trivium-based education that focused on a canon of Western civilization; the focus of

these latter elements was to prepare students to engage culture with a Christian perspective (Smith, 2020).

In addition to Smith's (2020) study's core findings, a significant secondary finding involved respondent's perceptions of *reasoning skills*. Smith found student reasoning skills "were considered important toward enabling students to detect fallacious ideas as well as to formulate and respectfully express valid opinions of their own" (p. 147). Within the broader framework of CCE, this finding aligned with rhetoric level stage learning goals within the classical and Christian school tradition. Classical Christian schools present as educational institutions which will train students to *thinkcritically*. One of the challenges of a proper Christian education is finding a way to challenge the lack of genuine faith in some young people (Dean, 2010, p. 6). According to Smith, the study results point to CCE as a potential solution to this problem since CCE perceptions point to a way for students to be prepared academically (reasoning skills) and spiritually (Smith, 2020, p. 147).

Classical Christian educator (and former student) Rebekah Merkle (2017) penned her book to bridge the gap between students' current perceptions of CCE and the future benefits of CCE. Merkle's main motivation in writing the book was to *change students' perception*s of their CCE. Concerning students' contemporary experience within the classrooms of CCE, Merkle noted her belief that "many students from classical schools have wandered off into the sunset after graduation, and several years down the road have suddenly noticed how very useful their education is proving to be" (p. 11). Merkle's assumption was most students, especially in the high school years, do not assign enough value to the opportunity they have within a CCE structure.

Among the many topics Merkle (2017) tackled within the realm of students' perceptions of CCE, perhaps none is more beneficial than the perceived benefits or lack of Latin instruction benefits. Many parents and students believe Latin instruction is non-essential because Latin is considered a dead language. However, Merkle argued students who develop Latin instruction skills increased their precision with English, and their "use of the mind" is greatly developed via Latin study (p. 42). Concerning Latin instruction and the need to counterbalance negative perceptions of Latin study, Merkle wrote:

> When you come out the other end of the chute after years of this, you will have a brain that is more organized, discerning, attuned to nuance, and capable of saying exactly what you want to say . . . and (this is the most important part) your mind will have been trained to do that even if you forget all of the Latin you ever studied. (p. 44)

This rhetorical presentation of the *delayed benefit* of Latin instruction is a key element concerning students' current and future CCE perceptions. The utilitarian nature of the need for Latin instruction is potentially juxtaposed to other languages, which may seem to have a more immediate benefit for students.

Merkle also wrote concerning other core pieces of a CCE: literature, logic, rhetoric, the trivium, worldview analysis, math, and science. In each category, she addressed CCE's fundamentals within a rhetorical overlay of *value the opportunity now for what it will mean to you later*. The presupposition of her thoughts concerning students' current and future perceptions of CCE is summed up in her proclamation, "the choices you are making right now are setting the course for where you'll be in five years, in ten, and in fifty" (Merkle, 2017, p. 98). The presented

conclusion is that changing students' perceptions of CCE will change their enjoyment and application of a particular type of education.

Summary

Classical education has existed in the Western world for a long time; it is as old as Greek and Roman civilization (Perrin, 2004), and while Christian education is as old as the church, the recent push for distinctly Christian education in America developed momentum in the 70s and 80s (Clark, Johnson, &Sloat, 1991). However, a new movement of Christian education, and Classical and Christian education as a combination, began to take root in America in the 90s (Lindquist, 2020) via school organizations such as the Association for Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS). As this movement has gained momentum, more Christian parents are selecting a classical and Christian education for their children; much of this choice by parents is rooted in perceptions of academic excellence and spiritual formation (Perrin, 2004). However, qualitative research is needed to investigate *students' perceptions* of their educational experiences within classical Christian schools. As ACCS and other classical and Christian schools grow in overall numbers and years of service, hearing students' voice their perceptions of their education at intervals of Ninth Grade, 12thGrade, early college, and early career may prove vital in better understanding how classical Christian education impacts students.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

There is a limited amount of emerging literature concerning students' perceptions of classical and Christian education. The currently available literature has focused on perceptions of adult school stakeholders, students' spiritual formation, and trivium-based education (Merante, 2019; Smith, 2020; Squires, 2019; Mitchell, 2019). Overall, the research has presented a view of the emerging classical and Christian school educational movement's pedagogical and spiritual elements within the United States. Specifically, the school environments studied are a part of the larger organizational umbrella of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS). ACCS has functioned as a rhetorical engine for the growth of classical Christian schools, and as more parents have selected this type of education for their children, qualitative research is needed to ascertain students' perceptions of the specific type of education they are receiving. This study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their classical and Christian education in selected schools within Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia.

Research Question

What are students' perceptions of classical and Christian education?

Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was selected for this research project; Merriam &Tisdell (2017) in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* noted that "the product of qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*" (p. 17). Therefore, a qualitative approach to research design allowed participants to provide narrative examples of their lived experiences within the classical Christian school setting. Participants provided qualitative data through the vehicle of focus group interviews. Cresswell's (2013) six-step approach for analyzing and

interpreting qualitative research data was utilized for organizing and understanding any emerging themes. The process included: (1) organizing the transcribed interviews, (2) reading the transcribed interviews for general understanding, (3) coding and categorizing the data, (4) describing categories and themes, (5) representing qualitative narrative, and (6) interpreting the findings (Creswell, 2013). This approach was practical as it provided a systematic approach for investigating students' perceptions of their education; also, the study's qualitative focus provided the best opportunity for meaningful insights for stakeholders with interest in the specific type of education provided within a classical Christian school context.

Site Selection

Three school sites were selected for this project. Each of the three sites was located in a rural setting; two of the sites were in Tennessee, with one site located in Northeast Tennessee and an additional site located in Southeast Tennessee. A school in Southwest Virginia served as the final school site. All three schools are private classical Christian schools and members of the Association of Classical Christian Schools; besides, all three schools are accredited through the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI).

The school located in Southeast TN was founded in 2009 and served 134 students, K - 12, in the 2020 - 2021 school year. The overall program housed 94 students in a K -Six elementary school and 40 students in attendance for Grades Seven through Twelve. 96% of the student population was Caucasian.

The Northeast TN school site was founded in 1994 and served 519 students within a pre-K - 12th Grade program in the 2020 - 2021 academic year. The elementary school, Grades K -Six, consisted of 294 students; the middle and high school program, Grades Seven through Twelve, made up the remaining 225 students. 93% of the student population was Caucasian.

The school site in Southwest VA was founded in 2010; in the 2020 - 2021 academic year, the school seated 182 students in a K - 12 program. 97% of the student population was Caucasian.

All three school sites are board governed schools committed to providing distinctly classical and Christian education for student populations ranging from pre - K to high school. Also, all three schools are non-denominational Christian schools serving a wide variety of Christian faith traditions within their local and surrounding communities. While all three schools function as small private schools, the most mature school of the three, founded in 1994, has over double the number of students as the two other school sites.

Participants in the Study

After an initial step of gaining permission from Milligan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was completed, all three school sites provided written permission for the study. Each school site's head of school (HOS) and the school board approved the study.

The study participants represented students from Ninth Grade, 12thGrade, early college (first or second year), and early career post-college. All three of the selected schools contributed participants for the project. Also, the focus group participants represented a variety of differences: (1) males and females, (2) time of graduation, (3) GPAs ranging from 2.9 - 4.0, (4) ACT scores ranging from 21 - 32, (4) ages ranging from 14 - 26, (5) extracurricular involvement including fine arts, a variety of sports, and various clubs, and (6) career choices. Finally, participants entered the focus group session with various backgrounds concerning longevity in a classical Christian school. Some participants attended a classical Christian school for the entirety of their education, while others transferred into a classical Christian school from a public school

or private school. Of participants transferring into the classical Christian school setting, the transfer range spanned elementary to high school.

The total number of participants in the study was 37; 18 participants were male, and 19 participants were female. Focus groups ranged from twoto four students, and data weregathered from one student as a personal interview. A personal interview was necessary because the participant represented the school site's lone graduate working in a career. Study participants were grouped according to grade level, early college, and early career. The breakdown for each grouping was Ninth Grade - 10 participants; 12thGrade - 10 participants; college -nine participants; career -eight participants.

Role of the Researcher

Due to the researcher serving as an administrator at one of the three school sites, the researcher served as a partially active participant in the study. The research project required the researcher to interview current and former students. Some of the participants involved in the project were former students of the researcher; this may have introduced some bias related to prior classroom and school interactions. However, interview questions and focus group questions were structured to avoid leading interviewees to any coerced response (Appendix B). In addition, two of the school sites involved participants who had no prior connection with the researcher.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

The data collection method employed for this study was qualitative via focus group interviews and one personal interview. Validity and reliability of data were established via the process of member checking. Study participants were contacted concerning data results to ensure their narratives and words were represented accurately. Also, the study's validity was grounded in the participants' age span; students interviewed included those who have completed a classical

and Christian education and emerged as college students or career level citizens, as well as students currently enrolled as Ninth and TwelfthGrade students.

Before the Study

Before launching the study, the study was vetted and approved by several organizational authorities. After completing a thorough Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, Milligan University's IRB approved the study. In addition, permission was obtained for each school site's school board and head of school.

Participating Schools

Each of the three participating school sites is a member of ACCS and accredited via ACSI. All three schools are located in small cities and are primarily serving a rural student population. Due to the demographics of each school, diversity was lacking within the school programs. While the range of students served are pre - K through 12^{th} grade (elementary to secondary), schools in the study were asked to provide high school and graduate students for data acquisition.

Selection of Participants

Focus group participants were selected via a process of working with each school's guidance counselors, principals, and head of school. The first part of the process included the personal delivery of the consent form information to each school's board and building-level leadership. After reading over and explaining the consent form to each party, the selection process, in conjunction with school officials, varied based on the available number of students. For example, one school site only had two graduating seniors available for an interview.Convenience sampling was utilized to produce focus groups representing various academic, extracurricular, and career interests and backgrounds. Each site produced four focus

groups: two from the high school level and two from the post-secondary level. All selected participants were informed of their right to abstain fromparticipation, and each participant agreed to complete focus group or personal interviews via Zoom (2012).

Implementation of the Study

After scheduling time with school authorities to provide a general overview of the study, potential participants were selected via a convenience sampling process. Contact was made with each participant via a personal visit, email, or phone call. The majority of first contact opportunities yielded willing participants for the study. It was necessary to schedule Zoom (2012) interview sessions based upon the focus group members' varying schedules. Once consent forms were completed and returned and a meeting time was established, the focus group sessions proceeded over four weeks. Each school selected provided focus groups varying from two to four members within Ninth Grade, 12thGrade, early college, and early career groupings. Each interview session was implemented by utilizing an interview guide (Appendix B) containingsemi-structured and open-ended questions. All focus group interview sessions were conducted and recorded via Zoom (2012). Each recording was saved to the researcher's local flash drive. Post-interview, an artificial intelligence software system, Sonix (www.sonix.ai), was utilized to upload each recording for assisted transcription. Following each uploaded session, the researcher listened to individual sessions to carefully make corrections. This ensured an accurate document transcription. Finally, coding of emerging themes was completed after the entirety of the study's interview phase was fully implemented and completed.

Open-ended and semi-structured questions were employed for all activities. The combination of both types of questions allowed interviewees to share their perceptions from a wide range of considerations; the end goal of the study implementation was to allow participants

to share their thoughts and perspectives on the education they received. After completing and transcribing all of the focus group interviews and one personal interview, personal phone calls or email were utilized to carry out member checking; the member checking process served to establish the reliability and validity of the study.

Data Management

Data were collectedvia Zoom (2012) interview sessions; each session was saved to a local flash drive (no cloud storage was utilized). Following each session, the researcher transcribed the recordings and saved the transcription to a local flash drive; upon completing the research project, all Zoom (2012) recordings will be deleted. All printed transcriptions and explanatory notes will remain secured in a locked filing cabinet for five years from the date of a successful defense of the research dissertation. The researcher is the only individual with access to the secure cabinet and the password-protected electronic data. At the end of five years, the researcher will shred all notes, both scripted and transcribed, via a shredding machine located at Providence Academy.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is, by design, "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 6). Cresswell's (2013) six-step process for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data was employed throughout the research process to assist in this process of meaningful construction. This process included:

(1) organization of the transcribed interviews

(2) reading the transcribed interviews for broad themes

(3) coding and categorizing the data

(4) describing categories and themes

(5) representing qualitative narrative

(6) interpreting the findings

Focus group interview transcriptions were read, highlighted, annotated, and categorized to ascertain any emerging themes. As themes and categories were identified, the supporting narrative constructions were assigned to the identified themes. Also, any potential sub-themes were noted and organized according to the emerging broader themes presented in the collected data. Each interview transcript was initially read to ascertain any prominent emerging themes; this process was repeated several times to investigate the data at a more granular level.

Following the analysis and description of emerging themes, individual excerpts from the focus group sessions were assigned to the appropriate category. This process formed the base of support for the overarching themes and developing narrative of the study. The initial process of Creswell's six-step method (2013) was repeated several times to ensure no major themes or sub-themes were missed in the coding process. The findings of the study are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Trustworthiness

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), qualitative research ensures validity and reliability when conducted "in an ethical manner" (p. 237). This study provided a focus group interview forum for current and former students to tell their stories concerning their own perceptions of their classical and Christian-based education. To ensure the accuracy of the study respondents' emerging data, the researcher employed member checking from Cresswell's methodology for analysis (2013). Due to COVID-19 pandemic concerns, the process of member checking was completed via phone calls, emails, and Zoom conferences. The credibility and

dependability of the study emerged in two primary ways. First, the study required the researcher to rely on participants to tell the truth concerning their educational experiences. Validity and reliability were achieved via focus group interviews, a personal interview, and member checking. A presupposition of the study was the belief that participants had few to no substantial reasons to withhold sharing their actual perceptions. Two, the research project allowed participants to tell their stories and to represent their perceptions and experiences via semi-structured and open-ended questions. Moreover, follow-up questions were tailored to the emerging responses from dynamic focus group interaction.

The study's validity was also realized via member checking in recognizing common themes within the data. Moreover, the researcher was committed to telling participants' stories and representing their experiences with accuracy. This accuracy of representation was achieved via a meticulous transcription process and Cresswell's (2013) six-step process. The study's generalizability and transferability were rooted in the level of importance to those who are invested in similar classical Christian school settings. Transferability of the study was more immediately manifested by presenting the study's findings to the school sites involved in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers Vanclay, Baines, & Taylor (2013), in their article on ethical research involving humans, noted that core areas such as specific permissions, rights to withdraw, and harm prevention are paramount in social and educational research (p. 247). As such, the following steps of ethical considerations were taken by the researcher:

1. Each participant was provided a written participation agreement; this document included the study's purpose and objectives.

2. Each participant signed a consent form that includes an explanation of the ability to withdraw from the research at any time; this form may be viewed in Appendix C.
3. Each student participant was provided a consent form to be signed by a parent or legal guardian; a student may withdraw from the study at any time.
4. Collected data were password protected; interview transcriptions were stored and locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's administrative office; both the office and the file cabinet wereonly accessible to the researcher.
5. These safeguards provided a negligible level of risk to participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Potential Contributions of the Research

There is very little research concerning the growing classical Christian school movement in the United States. While this study's immediate impact will be applicable to the institutions involved in the study, in a broader sense, the study will contribute to the emerging research concerning students' perceptions of this unique type of educational experience. As noted by Merriam &Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is utilized to "find *answers*" to research questions (p. 203). As a relatively young movement within educational circles, classical Christian educators, parents, and leaders want to know what *students* are experiencing as they move through their education.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

This qualitative research project aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their classical and Christian education. Specifically, the study aimed to focus on students' perception at different intervals of their classical Christian school experience. These intervals included high school freshman, high school seniors, college, and career levels. As outlined in Chapter Three, a qualitative approach was employed to gather qualitative data from students as they shared their perceptions of their educational experiences.

The qualitative approach of this study relied heavily on focus group interviews. Concerning the benefits of focus groups, author M. Hennink (2014) wrote:

> Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have *heard.* (p. 2-3)

These elements of sharing views, hearing other views, and refining views were present in this study. The study's qualitative data were gathered from 37 participants, via a convenience sample, from three classical Christian school sites. Each school site primarily serves students from a rural setting; two schools are located in Tennessee, and the third school resides in Virginia. The demographics of the school sites are represented in Table 1.

Table 1

School Site Demographics

School Site	School Setting	Total Enrollment	High School Enrollment (7-12)
School 1	Rural	134	40
School 2	Rural	519	225
School 3	Rural	182	57

The three school sites provided participants for 11 focus group interviews; one participant completed a personal interview. Focus group sessions included two to four participants, and each focus group session varied in length from 20 - 40 minutes. The data set included 18 males and 19 females.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed using Cresswell's (2013) six-step process for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. This process included organizing data, reading data, coding data, describing themes, narrating themes, and interpreting results. Each Zoom (2012) session was recorded, transcribed, and coded. Emerging themes were generated by unpacking the transcripts and identifying repeated themes. Also, themes were investigated by comparing data obtained from the primary questions used in the focus group sessions.

Research Question

What are students' perceptions of classical and Christian education?

Focus Group Interview Questions (Appendix B)

1. How would you describe or define the classical Christian education you received?
2. Discuss relationships within the context of your classical Christian education.

3. What are your perceptions of spiritual formation at school?
4. What are your perceptions of the benefits and challenges of a classical Christian education? Have you enjoyed your education?
5. What are your perceptions of how a classical Christian education has or has not prepared you for success in academics? In life?
6. What is your perception of wanting or not wanting a classical Christian education for your own children?

Emerging data were identified and categorized via an inductive process. Also, data were coded by the developing themes from the focus group interview questions. As an initial step, each Zoom (2012) session was uploaded to a voice-to-text transcription software system, Sonix.ai. After an initial transcription process was completed, each Zoom session was revisited for a second time; the second transcription process served to correct any potential mistakes from the software application. Once each transcript was reviewed for accuracy, the coding process began; data were noted and annotated to discern emerging themes and categorize repetitive concepts. The data were then organized according to themes. The global themes discovered in the study were: (1) Relationships, (2) Spiritual Formation, (3) Academic Preparation, and (4) Enjoyment of Education. The study included 37 participants; focus groups generated dynamic interaction. In the following data analysis and narrative, student participants are identified by a pseudonym of "Student" followed by an assigned number (Student 1, Student 12, etc.). Each student's words were captured individually via the transcription process.

Relationships

The most dominant perception theme across all groupings was the global theme of relationships. While relationships were a global theme that saturated the data, several sub-themes

concerning students' perceptions of relationships within their school setting manifested: (1) positive teacher to student relationships, (2) positive student to student relationships, (3) forming future relationships, and (4) dealing with relational discord. Specifically, 34 out of 37 participants noted their relationships with teachers were formative and positive. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of times these sub-themes were coded.

Table 2

Relationships as a Global Theme

Teacher-to-Students	Student-to-Student	Future Relationships	Relational Discord
40	30	6	7

As noted in Table 2, more participants noted the positive impact of healthy relationships with their teachers than any other sub-category within the global theme of relationships. While participants often referenced and cross-referenced the importance of relationships during their focus group sessions, they repeatedly returned to their teachers' specific theme of impact. Also, this theme spanned all categories of the study, Ninth Grade participants through career respondents. In this sense, the data revealed most participants currently enrolled in a K - 12 classical and Christian school viewed their relationships with teachers to be personal and healthy. In addition, in reflecting on relationships from their high school years, the college and career groups noted with consistency the importance of their relationships with their high school teachers.

Positive teacher to student relationships

Students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers represented a consistent and powerful theme. The following excerpts from focus group participants captured the breadth and depth of the theme.

A core question for the focus groups was: what are your perceptions of your relationships with teachers? Student 5 responded, "they are kind of like second parents." Student 6 provided a detailed description concerning teacher-to-student relationships.

> And they're all relatable. They're not just like, OK, I'm the teacher and you are the student and you have to listen to me. If there's something going on that you need to talk about, they can be that friend, and they can be that ear; they can help guide you.

Connected to teachers' ability to relate to students was the affirmation of students' perceptions that teachers were more than just instructors. In terms of how personal teacher-to-student relationships felt for Student 22, the student shared, "graduation was so personal, and I felt like I was remembered as a person." Student 22 also stated, "they truly care about who you are as a person and not just as a student." The intentional attempt to care deeply and personally for students was captured in the following excerpt from Student 22.

> Some of the things I walked through while at school would be so bad and so hard on me that I have had teachers pull me in the hallway and just stop and pray for me because you are in such a small environment, when something is off, it's so noticeable. And so due to that, I had teachers who were praying with me, uplifting me, reading the word to me, texting the word to me, and just offering a peace I didn't know outside of my school.

Other participants noted the positive personal and connected nature of teacher-to-student relationships. Student 9 presented the connection between school size and impactful teacher-to-

student relationships by stating, "and it did help that it was a smaller school and they were able to like notice that. But it was very easy to make those relationships with our teachers." Student 11 described his middle and high school years in a classical Christian school setting as relaxed, interpersonal, and connected compared to his previous experiences in a public school.

> I think my relationships with teachers were a little more relaxed in that environment because it was so interpersonal and the class environment was so small. I still respected them, and I admired most, if not all of them. But, they honestly felt more like friends and mentors than, you know, like teachers that I just had to obey the whole time. It's a joyful experience for me when I run into one of my teachers; if I see one of them at the store or if I see some at church, I mean, it's a pleasant experience for me. I can tell they are still very interested in what's going on in my life, and they are spiritually and emotionally invested in me.

Student 8 echoed this sentiment of relationships beyond academics; she stated, "and so just having those close relationships and knowing like, hey, this guy is my math teacher, but he also cares about me and my walk with the Lord."

Approachability was also noted within the theme of positive teacher-to-student relationships. Student 14 stated, "you could talk to them about your faith or talk to them about church or anything like that." In similar language, Student 18 reflected, concerning an influential teacher, "he just had a heart to like, you know, talk to the kids and figure it out, you know, kind of know what they are thinking." This type of descriptive language was used frequently in the focus groups to denote the two-way nature of the teacher-to-student relationships. While students felt free to approach their teachers about a wide variety of topics and issues, teachers equally acted in ways that enabled them to know their students at a deeper level. Concerning students'

perceptions of how teachers actively pursued healthy relationships with students, Student 24 shared, "it's cool to see how the teachers, like they really care about you and they pray for you." As an example of how students perceived they were deeply known, Student 29 said teachers often remembered, in great detail, elements of their students' lives.

> I mean, I still have Mrs. S., when I see her, she still remembers a lot of stuff about me. And then the teachers who are gone, they still keep up with us. And the ones who are still here know a whole bunch of stuff about us that I don't even remember! That has made school really enjoyable beyond just having to be here to graduate. It's made it fun, and I know I can confide in them. And I feel safe around most of my teachers.

In response to Student 29 and the above statement, Student 26 said, "if I didn't have that (close relationships with teachers), my high school experience, even at this school, would have just been completely different."Participants often echoed their perception of teachers possessing authentic care and concern for them. Student 27 best encapsulated this sentiment when she said, "so, it's nice to know, it's nice to know that every teacher that you had genuinely cares about you and wants to see you succeed."

When participants were prompted to provide their perceptions of what had impacted them the most, relationships with teachers were a strong theme in terms of total impact. Student 26 stated directly, "my relationships with the staff, with the teachers, so much with the teachers." Student 32 reflected on his relationships with his middle and high school teachers in arhetorically comparative sense. He said, "those who come out of bigger schools, they don't know their teachers as well." This perspective of connecting strong relationships with school and class size was presented consistently across all focus groups. When asked to describe or define the

classical Christian school experience, Student 34 immediately noted teacher-to-student relationships as a core distinctive.

> I guess, looking at small classes, personal time with teachers, and that's the very kind of first thing that I think about. Very personal, just that emphasis on relational. I felt like my experience was very relational, and that's just, kind of, just the first thing I think of.

As noted earlier, in the distinct classical Christian school setting, the connection students felt with their teachers spanned from Ninth Grade to career focus groups. This importance was present in two primary ways. First, even questions and prompts not directly related to teacher-to-student relationship often turned toward how important this domain was to participants. Second, Ninth Grade and 12th-Grade participants noted the importance and reality of this theme in their current experience. College and career participants were very reflective concerning this category's importance. In short, current high school students perceived close-knit relationships with their teachers was indeed present and ongoing; college and career participants reflected upon teacher-to-student relationships as a dominant and formative element of their prior educational experiences.

Positive student-to-teacher relationships

Student-to-student relationships were also a consistent theme, within the global theme of relationships presented in the interview transcripts. Similar to the recurring nature of positive teacher-to-student relationships, student-to-student relationships were noted, in a positive light, across several semi-structured and open-ended questions.

The positive perceptions of students were often noted within the context of small class sizes and small schools. Freshman Student 2 said, "since there's less people, it's harder for someone to feel left out because there's so few people. It's hard to get a big group with someone

left out." In addition to a small inclusive environment, a Student 28 (12thGrade) said, "I would say that a good thing is just being around other Christians and just knowing these kids are good and you can have fellowship with them."

The influence of positive student-to-student relationships in small classes was also noted for current students, generating a sense of self-confidence in students within the classroom. Participants noted their close relationships with each other created comfort in sharing thoughts and opinions. Student 20 shared a powerful example of the "freeing" nature of these close-knit relationships among students.

> I love small classes. I have learned so much better in small classes because I feel freer to voice my opinion and say something that's maybe wrong, and I do not feel bad for being corrected on it. However, in a group of 20, 30, 40, or 50 people, I would never open my mouth. Even with the confidence I have gained from drama classes, I would never open my mouth.

One college participant noted the overall "feel" of close-knit student relationships in his small school setting. Student 30 said:

> I did not feel like I was grouped in like a herd of sheep in public schools running through three hundred students in a specific class; I knew all twenty-four I graduated with well. Twenty-four close friends. And I know that's not necessarily from the educational perspective, but from the personal interaction.

Student 30 also shared that these personal interactions happened in an organic way outside of the classroom experience. He noted, "we would do our own informal discussions outside of class." Student 6, a high school senior, echoed this sentiment of in-class and out-of-class interaction; she

said, “we're so small that we all know each other; they will be your partner in class. It's so close-knit and everybody knows everybody.”

Students' relationships were also described in familial terms. Several participants shared that the amount of time spent with others in the small school setting invited a family-like atmosphere. Student 11 said, "everybody felt like my brother and my sister." One college participant noted she graduated with a class of six students. This small environment made it easy for her to "make relationships with my peers." Moreover, Student 11 said, "I would just say that we were all basically,like a family and still are; there was a lot of emphasis on relationships; we got to build relationships and mentor younger students."

Another foundational piece of student-to-student relationships was the K - 12 structure of small classical Christian schools. Student 24, a Ninth Grader, said, "you grow up with the people that you are in class with and you are going to be with them for like the next 13 years from kindergarten." Student 10 noted, "we were K - 12 in the same building; we got to build relationships." This unique feature of an entire school housed in one building was a repeated theme across the focus groups; this reality provided multiple opportunities and challenges for students to connect with younger students. Moreover, student-to-student relationships formed more easily, in the high school year, across grade levels. Student 19, a career-level graduate, shared concerning a multi-level experience of close friendships.

> I am close friends with others who were not in the same grade; I did not graduate with them. I am close friends with students who graduated one and two years after me. So, it was a very close-knit school even beyond your own grade. It extended beyond the grade that you were in.

Forming future relationships

Several college and career participants shared their belief that their classical and Christian education served as a catalyst for understanding how to develop healthy relationships in the future. Student 22, a first-year college student, noted, "my relationships with my teachers have really impacted how I form relationships with people outside of my classical Christian school." The context of this data response was her sense of feeling comfortable and confident of forming new relationships in a healthy way.

This sub-theme was also presented in a response generated via a broader question concerning defining or describing perceptions of receiving a classical Christian education. Student 32, a second-year college student, shared her perception that she felt at ease to reach out to her college professors, in her much larger post-secondary school setting, because of her past experiences of reaching out to teachers during the high school years. Student 32 said, "so I think it helps early learning (in college) when you know how to reach out to these people (college professors)." However, this concept of how the relational aspect of the small classical Christian school setting impacted forming future relationships *was not* limited to future academic pursuits. In connection to relationship building, Student 31 said, "so that's been a benefit. Relationships, like I said, having to learn how to develop relationships."

Student 9 touched on this theme by connecting relational accountability, spiritual growth, and future relationships. The core concept presented was how experiencing positive relationships in high school led to seeking and forming positive relationships in the future.

> It was great accountability because we were so close. But that was good to learn in high school and just to know for the future. We were able to be vulnerable with each other to where we could notice whenever somebody was falling or somebody needed to be lifted

> up. And that was great accountability. But that was good to learn in high school; just knowing the needs of accountability throughout life. And I realized, I need to find that in other places in my life and build that same community that I had.

Relational discord

A final sub-theme within the broader global theme of relationships was the difficulty and learning produced through relational discord. This theme was heavily connected to small classes. If and when students experienced relational discord, there was nowhere to remove themselves from the tension produced. In this sense, participants sharing those small classes were greatly disadvantaged. Student 33, a second-year college student, indicated the difficulty of the small school setting for students who struggled to find friends.

> I think sometimes for certain people, they might not be as lucky, like our class was pretty close. But for some people I know, just individuals who might have left the school because they didn't click with their class. And, it's like, what do you do? Because you are only given a small amount of people that you can click with. If you don't click with them, then you don't have much other choices for friends. You might hate going to school every day because you have no other option other than people you do not want to be with.

Student 16, a senior, when asked about how the size of a small school negatively impacted him responded, "I have not had as much opportunity to form relationships." In this sense, the small school environment created a perception of "all or nothing" concerning opportunity to form and build positive relationships. When students were able to find close student-to-student friendships, the experience was enriching. However, the limited number of students posed a real challenge for some. Also, this study included participants who transferred to the small classical Christian school in elementary, middle, and high school. Student 1, a transfer from a previous classical

Christian school, stated it was her observation that the small classical Christian environment could be challenging to enter into due to a small school population.

> I would say it's easier for you to leave people out because it's such a close-knit school; coming in as a new person, it can really be overwhelming. And lots of times it would be more difficult to jump right in and kind of blend because you are more obviously the new person, because there are not very many kids that go to these schools. It's a lot easier to leave people out.

Student 26 felt relational discord was the major drawback for the small nature of classical Christian schools. She said, "if there's high school drama going on, everyone knows about it. You are in the classroom with them; it's small, and you cannot avoid it; it's awkward."

However, connected to this sub-theme of relational discord and small classes, some respondents noted the ultimate outcome of relational discord due to a small school setting as positive. Student 31, a second-year college student, reflected on this reality by saying, "when you have a small class, if you are going to be there, you kind of have to figure out how to get along; it's either that or be miserable." The core concept he presented was the small school and class size generated a certain type of *necessity* for conflict resolution. In similar language, Student 21 said, "you are forced to work through your differences if you have any, because you see them every day." Student 6, a high school senior, captured the essence of relational success and discord when she stated, "the closeness is a curse and a blessing at the same time. It's also teaching you how to play well with others."

Spiritual Formation

Study participants repeatedly referenced the impact of classical Christian education on their spiritual lives. Stories shared ranged from a deep appreciation for how much biblical

knowledge was gained via their education to deep and meaningful spiritual transformation. Several participants expressed their perception that their classical Christian education's spiritual impact eclipsed any other area of their religious and spiritual lives. This global theme manifested across four sub-themes: (1) biblical worldview education, (2) personal spiritual growth, (3) preparation to engage culture, and (4) feeling sheltered. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the number of times these sub-themes were coded in the data sets.

Table 3

Spiritual Formation as a Global Theme

Personal Spiritual Growth	Biblical Worldview	Preparation to Engage	Feeling Sheltered
20	20	11	9

Personal spiritual growth

Participants noted with frequency and thick description the impact their classical Christian education had on their spiritual growth. Student 9, as a college student, reflected on her perception that her school experiences had a greater impact on her than her church life. In part, she rooted this in the volume of time she spent at school versus the amount of time she engaged with her church. Student 10 echoed this perception and noted, "My school had a much bigger impact than my church." On a personal level, this outsized impact was due to how teachers in Bible classes approached instruction in a very personalized way. Student 8 shared a narrative that captured personal spiritual growth and instruction from personalized Bible instruction.

> While it seemed at church you were spoken to with a sermon, at school we got to unpack all of that. We had an hour every day where we just studied scripture, and we had a really

> good Bible teacher. And sometimes we would even say, our pastor spoke about this yesterday, and we don't really understand it. And no matter what our teacher had planned for the day, he would throw that out the window and say, OK, let's talk about this. Also, if
>
> someone had something they were struggling with and brought it up in class, we would talk about that topic in class.

Student 20, as a career graduate, reflected on his classical Christian education from the perspective of transferring into a classical Christian school after attending a public school in elementary and middle school. After entering his new school on the brink of adopting atheism as a worldview, he credited his school environment with playing a major role in opening his eyes to Christianity. He said, "I feel as if classical Christian education has completely changed my life and totally turned it around from the way I used to be." Student 11, in a separate focus group, echoed this powerful theme of personal transformation.

> I don't even know if I would be a Christian had I not gone to a classical Christian school. And that's with me growing up in a good Christian family with good parents, but my church situation and my church experience growing up was very disappointing. And I just had a lot of encounters with Christians that were very confusing for me. However, at school I was surrounded by all of these teachers who obviously cared about Christ and making much of Him with their lives, and they were genuinely excited about what they did.

This perception of positive spiritual transformation caused Student 11, when asked a speculative question concerning whether or not he would want a classical Christian education for his future

children, to reply, "I would want them (future children) to have other positive Christian role models to look to outside of myself."

Several participants rooted personal spiritual transformation in the daily discipline of reading the Bible at school. One Ninth Grader noted reading the Bible in a designated class five days a week "gets you in the mindset of talking to God every day and praying every day." Student 25 shared her perception of feeling transformed by reading the Bible, collectively across the school, each morning. Along with daily Bible reading, Student 16, as a high school senior, perceived his Bible instruction "helped me learn the Bible." Student 27 shared that personal transformation happened in the school setting due to first reading the Bible at school and then participating in a deep analysis of the scriptures. Student 2, a Ninth Grader, notes the profound personal transformation he had experienced in his school.

> Well, we definitely go deep. We have chapel every week, so not only does it teach us about certain instances in the Bible, but it goes deeper into them and explains a deeper spiritual meaning. As we have gotten older, we dive more into the depths of the Bible. It's very enlightening and illuminating.

Biblical worldview

A core feature of the classical Christian school model is instruction in a biblical worldview across the curriculum. Focus groups for freshmen and seniors often noted the impact of their worldview education; however, the college and career groups spoke more often about their application of instruction in a biblical worldview after entering college and career.

While Student 1, a freshman, shared that her biblical worldview education taught her how to approach "deeper discussions" concerning theology, Student 13, also a freshman, noted the

negative side of his worldview education in terms of application opportunity. He said, "we do not have much practice with other people challenging our faith." This sentiment was present in several of the freshman and senior focus groups. The students felt they were getting a solid education in biblical worldview, but they really had little opportunity to put their training to use. This was noted as a result of the small Christian school setting, which dominated their day-to-day experiences.

Student 28, a senior, felt he had some opportunity to apply his biblical worldview education via the "worldly" movies presented in his school setting. He shared, "we can see the overarching things that are in common with the Bible." In response to a question concerning how he would define or describe his education, he responded with his belief that overarching biblical worldview themes had been presented across the curriculum consistently. Other focus group participants spoke of how the Bible was brought into all of their classes consistently.

However, the attempt to use a biblical worldview for analysis felt forced to some participants. Student 26 said, in response to a follow-up question concerning the frequency of biblical worldview analysis, "sometimes it seemed kind of pointless to do the biblical perspective." Student 29 was more forward with her perceptions of forced biblical worldview analysis for some areas of study.

> Because, I mean, I have definitely seen that we were forced to make something Christian that does not quite fit. The world does not quite fit perfectly into biblical ideals, because the biblical ideals are perfect and we as humans are not. But sometimes we stretch it just a little too much and take stuff out of context.

Freshman and senior participants did express a sense of thanksgiving for their biblical worldview education concerning their perceptions of a world which is hostile to their faith.

Student 23 said, "the world is hostile to Christianity." Student 25 shared, "in Bible we talked alotabout worldview and culture; it gave me a perspective of what other people believe." Student 6 shared she felt ready to apply her faith to the real world because she learned "there's so many different worldviews coming into play." The idea here was *awareness* of how perspectives and views different from the Christian faith were presented within the school setting.

The college and career focus groups noted they felt prepared by the biblical worldview education when opportunities presented in the "real world" after high school. Student 19, a career participant, talked about his perceptions of interacting with secular people after being saturated in a biblical worldview, both academically and relationally, during the high school years.

> It definitely set me up for success after I left and started working and was now around a lot of people who were not Christian. I was a little bit worried, to be honest, because my whole life growing up, I had only been around fellow Christians. So, I didn't know what my personal response would be. When I first began to interact with more secular people who did not share my worldview, I think that my experience at Cornerstone definitely helped me succeed spiritually through that.

One element of this sense of "success" was attributed to what Student 20 labeled as confidence in the engagement of others. He said, "I was not afraid to talk to people." Student 30, a second-year college student, shared his perception that his biblical worldview education helped him to "hopefully bring others to Christ." Student 36 described his perception of success in his personal Christian life as partially attributed to a biblical worldview education which taught him "everything is based on the gospel and laced with absolute truth."

Preparation to engage

Participants in the study shared perceptions of feeling prepared to engage the world spiritually; this preparation was, they believed, situated in their educational experiences. Thissub-theme was powerfully presented by Student 6, a senior, in her response to the speculative question of whether she would want a classical Christian education for her future children. Her response referenced her confidence to engage the world spiritually.

> I need their shields and their swords to be ready. Because what they are about to go into, mom can't be there all the time. They need to guard their hearts, so if it's not my current Christian school, it's going to be some other Christian school I send my future kids to. And from the experience I had, the preparation and the change that happened in me, it's worth paying the money.

Student 23 specifically referenced this theme of feeling prepared to engage culture when he said, "we talked about how to engage in culture rather than assimilating with it." In some of the data, participants specifically referenced their spiritual preparation to engage the world around them in terms of the Christian practice of apologetics. Student 13 noted he felt prepared in "how to defend my faith when I go out into the world."

This coded sub-theme is also presented in participant's responses to academic environments. Student 34 shared her perception of feeling very prepared to engage in collegiate level Bible classes which challenged her perceptions of her own Christian faith.

> I remember going into classes in my Christian college and having classmates who were discouraged by some things being taught in Bible class because they could not reconcile what they were being taught with what they were being taught in church – different views

> or different perspectives on Bible stories or things like that. And I remember having a pretty solid foundation, and being like, you know, this is what I believe. I may disagree, during this engagement with my professor, but that doesn't cause me to question my faith completely or make me want to pull out of my Christian college.

Student 11 echoed this response when he said, "our classroom experience was not just absorbing information; we learned how to engage with culture and think about things in a critical manner." Student 11 had internalized this part of education to the extent of reciting his school's mission statement from memory, "train students to think, live, and *engage* with the world in a manner which brings glory to God."

It is important to note the data of this theme presented as *perceptions* of meaningful *preparation* to engage freshman and senior students' culture. College and career participants felt their experiences validated the strength of their earlier preparation. Participants at the college and career level. Student 34 best summed up this view when she said, "I felt I was ready for any challenge, as in I was very confident (to engage)."

Feeling sheltered

A negative perception, shared as a sub-theme of the global theme of spiritual formation, noted across all groups was a sense of *feeling sheltered*. While some participants referenced a small amount of appreciation for elements of being sheltered via the K - 12 classical Christian education received, the negative long-term effects were more dominant as a theme. Specifically, some of the participant groups expressed concern about a small school Christian environment's future ramifications, which sheltered them too much—those concerns presented as actualized data among the college and career groups.

Student 29, a senior in high school, shared her perception of feeling academically prepared for college while fearing a “big shock” in moving beyond her classical Christian school experience.

> But I also feel like there is going to be a big shock factor in life, just moving past my high school, because I am very sheltered and my parents did that on purpose; my mom has recently slowly integrated things in letting me make bigger decisions by myself. But I still know there’s going to be a big shock factor when I go to college and I don’t even know how to begin to prepare myself for that.

This sense of being too sheltered and the negative result was echoed in several current college and career level participants' experiences. Student 35 described her move to a Christian college as a “huge culture shock.” Student 36 felt his freshman year of college caused him to feel “a lot of culture shock.” Both of these responses connected to a follow-up question concerning the difficulties of making the transition from a small Christian school to a college setting. Student 37 also affirmed feelings of culture shock.

> Oh, yeah. I would say that there was definitely a culture shock going from a place like my high school to college. Everyone doesn’t act the same way that you are used to; there is not the demeanor you are used to. Language that people would not have used in my high school was common. Everybody does it, and there’s really no other way.

Student 35 noted, “I didn’t know how sheltered I was until I got into college.” This theme of transitional tension spanned several interview questions.

Student 21, a college sophomore, perceived one positive from what he considered a “sheltering” education that produced “protection from emotional trauma because you are around like-minded people.” However, he also noted his public university experience made him feel like

his prior experience was similar to "being in a bubble." Student 22 echoed this perception of the negative results of being in a "bubble."

> It's a totally different world when you are out of your Jesus bubble, especially if you have been sent to a small classical Christian school all of your life. When your Jesus bubble is popped, you have no idea what to do. When I started college and my Jesus bubble was popped, I did not know how to react. I almost feel like my prior education was so Christ focused that they didn't talk about the real things going on in the world. We chose to neglect them instead of addressing them. And so instead of being taught by adults we trust, who are strong Christians, we were left to fend for ourselves once we got to college.

This lack of talking about the real issues emerging college students may face was also addressed by some career participants. In connection to spiritual formation, this element in the data indicated some participants felt their school missed an opportunity to address emerging moral issues for students. Student 36 shared his belief concerning the need for schools to be more proactive in cultivating tough conversations.

> I can definitely agree that I felt sheltered when I went to college, and I think the challenging part of our classical Christian education was I wish some of the difficult things of life were not talked about in light of God's word – sin and struggles with addiction. My parents never talked to me about sexual intimacy and how when it was time to get married. I just wish that was something that was talked about in light of God's word, and on the same thread, I wish my school would have maybe tackled those issues.

In contrast to these views from college and career participants, several freshman respondents, when asked if they felt sheltered, responded negatively. Student 23 said, "I don't really think

being sheltered is a problem." Student 24 shared, "I think we will be prepared to know what to do." The freshman respondents indicated they felt prepared by their Christian education for future temptations. The senior respondents expressed concern that perhaps they were not prepared for the moral challenges of college. College and career respondents overwhelmingly shared a perception of feeling sheltered once they reached college.

Academic Preparation

Participants often cited their convictions concerning their academic preparation. While all groups shared perceptions of feeling academically prepared for future challenges, several college and career respondents and seniors distinguished between the preparation provided by their humanities education versus their math or science courses. Respondents noted perceptions of feeling more prepared or challenged in humanities than in math or science. Participants often noted the distinctive types of educational activities that saturate a classical education: open discussion, scored discussion, public speaking, writing, and critical thinking. Students perceived these types of interactive learning modalities prepared them well for college. Participants also noted overall academic expectations and workload as helpful in their academic preparation. Within the global theme of student's perceptions of feeling academically prepared, the identified sub-themes were: (1) humanities versus math/science, (2) classical learning activities, and (3) expectations and workload.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the number of times the sub-themes were coded in connection to academic preparation's global theme.

Table 4

Academic Preparation as a Global Theme

Classical Learning Activities	Expectation / Workload	Humanities vs. Math/Science
47	28	10

Humanities vs. math / science

While participants did not note, as frequently, perceptions of how academically prepared or college-ready they felt when comparing humanities and math or science, the responses were more in-depth. Also, the smaller number of codes for this sub-theme was impacted by the majority of college and career participants' responses. As a global theme, seniors in high school and college or career participants felt sufficiently prepared for college-level humanities courses. In some instances, participants perceived they were *over prepared* for coursework in humanities. However, participants often shared perceptions which indicated they did not feel adequately prepared for college math and science coursework.

Student 36, a career-level college graduate, shared, “when I got to college, it seemed like all of the English classes and humanities classes were just a breeze.” Student 37 echoed this sentiment by stating, “for sure, I mean, the humanities preparation was far beyond the average person.” Connected to this sub-theme of preparation in the humanities, Student 18 said, “the longest paper I ever wrote was in high school; I did not ever do anything more challenging.” Student 19 also felt as if his academic preparation was, in some ways, more substantial than what he experienced in college.

> It was very, very substantial. When I went to college, it was almost like a step back and a breath of fresh air, almost a little bit easier than high school was just because I was so well prepared for college. So, it's good that you can go to college and it's like a breath of fresh air; a little bit easier than high school.

Several respondents indicated the humanities portion of their education was more advanced when directly asked concerning a comparison between humanities preparation and math / science preparation. Student 11 said, "humanities were stronger by quite a bit."

When addressing academic preparation in math or science, Student 32 shared, "I think math really was not their sort of thing; it could have been a lot bigger." Student 32 also noted a sense of feeling underprepared compared to college classmates who had opportunities to take more pre-engineering high school courses. She reflected on how such courses were not available at a small classical Christian school. Student 36 offered this perspective on math and science preparation: "when it came to math and science, it was a real struggle."

The lack of course offerings or overall quality of math and science preparation was tethered to school size. Student 8, a college junior, noted a lack of overall resources for math and science instruction.

> I felt ill-prepared going into college for two things. Something my school could not provide was a good science program. We just did not have the facility or the resources to have a good chemistry class; biology was a little bit better, but even having a staff capable of teaching it the way should be taught – we just did not have that. They did their best.

A senior in high school offered a perception based in comparison with math and science in public schools. Student 26 said, "even the honors math track is not as challenging as some of the

other classes in public schools." In this portion of the focus group session, Student 26 also noted her perception of feeling over prepared in English and history but underprepared in math and science.

The qualitative data within this sub-theme did present some instances of a general overall lack of concern about math and science preparation. This lack of concern was due to the academic college major participants were interested in pursuing. Student 30 said better math and science preparation was not critical because he felt prepared enough in math to pursue a business degree. Student 37 shared his perspective concerning his preparation to pursue more math and science in college.

> But I think I was moderately prepared. But I also took every hard class offered – physics and everything. So, I mean the average person is not probably going to do that. But I knew what I wanted to do long-term, and that was going to be in the sciences. So, I challenged myself.

Classical learning activities

Within the broad theme of academic preparation, participants often linked their classical learning activities to their perceptions of feeling academically challenged and ready. Students reported their perception of classical learning modalities, such as intense writing exercises, class discussions, public speaking, and Socratic seminars as academically enriching learning activities. It is important to note these activities were most often cited concerning humanities instruction.

Regarding the writing required in their school setting, students often noted the volume required and their experience's richness. Student 1, a freshman, shared her perception of feeling as her writing requirements were preparing her for future academic success.

> I think I will be more prepared for college, because right now, we write a lot of essays, and we don't learn by multiple choice or true and false. And most of our literature and history classes are writing and discussion based. So, it will help whenever we are in a college setting and we need to write more; we will have a better knowledge of how to do that.

Student 10, in relation to writing frequency, said, "I have never been a strong writer, but in high school, we were asked to write a thesis; we wrote a thesis paper that was 15 - 20 pages long." Student 30 shared a powerful perception concerning his classical education and writing ability.

> I had to go through all three English courses in college; my ACT wasn't good enough to get past those. My teacher pulled me aside in my second semester English course and told me my essay was one of the best he had ever read. I was not used to hearing that because I was not very good at writing in high school.

Public speaking requirements within the classical Christian school environment were often referenced in the data. Students felt very prepared due to their classical exercises, which often required them to speak, to debate, and to present. Student 29 shared, "I really came out of my shell in the last couple of years, public speaking wise; mock trials and debates are helpful for me." Student 13 also hit on this theme of academic preparation and public speaking, "public speaking is another key point. We have a logic and rhetoric class; it helps you develop an argument." Other participants shared their perceptions of entering college and feeling at ease with public speaking requirements. In response to a follow-up question concerning the benefits of public speaking requirements in a classical school, Student 35 shared her perception of feeling more prepared than her peers.

> When I started college and I was in a communications class, I didn't have a problem at all with standing up and talking in front of people because I had been in front of a board of scary men who were listening to my thesis presentation.

Beyond the considerable writing and speaking requirements in the classical curriculum, participants often cited their enjoyment of classroom conversations. Student 26 noted how much she valued her "ability to have my own opinion." She also shared her perception of the classical approach emphasizing free thought.

Expectation and workload

A major reason why students perceived they were academically prepared by classical Christian education was the sense of teacher expectation and overall academic workload and level of academic difficulty. Student 21, a current college student, when asked to describe his educational experience in high school, responded, "definitely some strenuous classes." Student 4 shared his belief that his education was helping him be "almost over prepared for college." Participants often rooted these types of responses in what they perceived as serious expectations from their teachers. Student 7 said, "one of our teachers informed a class of students that her class would prepare them for more difficult college courses." Participants repeatedly used words such as "hard" or "pushed to do more" when describing their education. Student 6, a former public school student said, "there's a lot more expected of you; there is a higher standard that you are held to than in a public school."

Participants also often shared their perceptions of forming good study habits due to the amount of work required by their teachers. Student 9, a current junior in college, expressed a sense of delayed gratification for the workload she was forced to manage in high school.

> One thing that I could not stand in high school that I am very thankful for now is the workload that we were given. Every night I had homework, and I hated it so much! And I remember always telling my mom, what's the point? I am just in high school. Why do I need all of this work? But little did I know. I've had about the same workload in college and I am not overwhelmed.

Freshman respondents consistently noted a heavy workload in their educational experience. In the main, participants at this level felt the workload was preparing them for future academic endeavors.

Some participants shared a delayed sense of appreciation or future gain due to the high expectations and workload related to the theme of expectation and workload. A senior participant said, "I didn't really like how difficult the curriculum was at first, but I have come to appreciate how valuable this type of education is." Student 20 felt as if the expectations placed on him eventually formed in him a desire to attempt more difficult challenges.

> It made me feel like I could tackle any task whereas beforehand, I would limit myself to saying, well, that might be too much for me or too big of a goal to shoot for. But with the classical education system, it emboldened your inner person and encouraged you to take on tasks that you normally would not take on – just to see if you could do it.

Enjoyment of Education

The global theme of enjoyment of education presented in the data resulted from the initial focus group interview question: Have you enjoyed your classical Christian school education? The responses offered led to several follow-up questions concerning *why* participants felt the way they did concerning their education. Participants gave varied reasons concerning why they developed positive perceptions concerning their enjoyment of their education. Also, several

participants noted while they *did not* feel as if they enjoyed their high school experience, post-high school they were thankful their parents left them in a classical Christian school. Within the global theme of enjoyment of education, three sub-themes were represented in the data: (1) the classroom experience, (2) teachers, and (3) lack of enjoyment of education. It is important to note the third category, as a sub-theme, carried with it narratives around a lack of enjoying a classical Christian education as it was *happening*, but a reflective attitude of assigning value to the educational experience *after it was completed*. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the organizing sub-themes that were coded within the global theme of enjoyment of education.

Table 5

Enjoyment of Education as a Global Theme

The Classroom Experience	Teachers	Lack of Enjoyment of Education
20	10	6

The classroom experience

Participants also often referenced their enjoyment of their education concerning classroom discussions. Class discussions happened regularly, and Student 2, a freshman, noted his enjoyment of the learning environment as "an open education; you are allowed to ask questions; you are not going to be made fun of if you do not know something." Student 14 echoed this sentiment of an open discussion education, "here, I feel I can be open with my friends and with my teachers."

Some participants interacted with questions concerning their enjoyment of a classical Christian education by comparing it to their previous public school experiences. These responses

were often presented in terms of positive perceptions of school enjoyment rooted in small classes and the curriculum. Student 11, a career level participant, shared, “I got enjoyment out of engaging with different types of material and different ideas; the school taught me to respect classical literature; my school turned me into a learner and someone who loves to learn.”

Teachers

Participants also connected their enjoyment of their education with the theme of relationships. Specifically, participants referenced their relationships with their *teachers*, in a small school setting, as a catalyst for enjoying their educational experiences. Student 29, a career participant, touched on this connection between relationships with teachers and enjoyment of education.

> So, you know, all of the students had a very close relationship with all of the teachers. And I really enjoyed that. Just being able to have an actual personal relationship with each of my teachers rather than being in a class with maybe 50 other students where, you know, you don’t really get the chance to know your teachers.

Student 7 shared her perceptions of how her instructors loved the subject matter. She connected this passion for subject matter to her developing sense of enjoying education. In effect, the passion of teachers made her passionate about learning the material. Student 26, a senior in high school, shared her perceptions of developing a love for and enjoyment of reading and the humanities. She said, “now, I read books, and like books, I never thought I would be able to comprehend; now, I like Shakespeare and stuff.”She noted this newfound enjoyment of literature was modeled for her by her teachers.

Lack of enjoyment

College and career participants also expressed a reflective attitude which noted they *did not* enjoy their education *as it was happening.* However*,* after they completed their high school education, they were thankful their parents required them to remain in a classical Christian school setting. Student 22 shared her thankfulness for her parents' perseverance.

> I hated it; I hated it pretty much up until my day of graduation. But now I am so thankful for my parents' perseverance and pushing me to stay at my school. I ended up thanking my parents for not listening to my pleas to leave. My perspective has changed; now I would 100%, as a future parent, would send my kids to a Christian school.

Student 36 offered his perceptions of feeling *grateful* for his parents' steadfastness concerning his high school education.

> I am thankful, now, that my parents forced me to stay. I do remember a handful of conversations with my dad. You know, at the time, I was ready to go to the public school. But I am thankful that my parents kind of gave me an ultimatum and were, like, NO, you are staying in your current school.

Student 4, a current senior in high school, described his enjoyment of classical Christian education in terms of *change* as he progressed through his schooling. While he did not enjoy his education in the early years of the process, his attitude slowly changed.

> Over the years, I have changed. When I was a smaller child, I did not enjoy my education because it was very hard for me. I didn't realize what it was preparing me for. But as I have grown, I've definitely learned to enjoy it more because I know what it is preparing me for. But, also the curriculum. I find it enjoyable.

Summary of Findings

Chapter Four summarized the findings gleaned from the study. The global themes presented in the data are: (1) Relationships, (2) Spiritual Formation, (3) Academic Preparation, and (4) Enjoyment of Education. Relationships and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 83 times; spiritual formation was coded 60 times; academic preparation was coded 85 times; enjoyment of education was coded 36 times. The tables, narrative, and excerpts provide a rich and detailed description of the qualitative data.

Chapter Five will provide discussion of the implications and limitations of the study. In addition, areas of future research will be presented.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

While still a relatively young movement, the classical Christian school movement in the United States now boasts over more than 40,000 students (Lindquist, 2020). As current classical Christian schools continue to mature and develop, stakeholders have a keen interest in understanding how this educational model is impacting students. This study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their classical Christian education; the modality of the study was qualitative. This approach allowed students to share their perceptions and their stories concerning their educational experiences. As an overall approach, Chapter Five is written via the researcher's interpretive lens; the interpretive process is accompanied by a synthesis and analysis of the data findings.

The study's guiding research question was singular: What are students' perceptions of classical and Christian education?

The qualitative data gathered for this study were gleaned from focus group interview sessions with students. Focus groups were selected because of the possibility of generating dynamic group interaction, leading to a better quality of responses (Hennink, 2014). The focus groups generated for the study included current and former students in K - 12 classical Christian schools in Ninth Grade, 12thGrade, college, and career; the ages of student participants spanned 14 - 26 years old. Once all of the data were transcribed, a process of organizing and coding the data was used to discover the study's emerging global themes and accompanying sub-themes (Creswell, 2013).

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study discussed in this section present the identified themes from the data collected. Analysis and presentation of data that support these described themes are included in Chapter Four of this study. These findings are the result of the collected and transcribed responses of each study participant.

Themes regarding relationships

As a universal theme across all age groups within the study, the theme of positive experiences with *relationships* permeated students' perceptions of their education. Specifically, students noted the considerable impact of their relationships with their teachers. Students often communicated their belief in being cared for on a personal level. In short, students conveyed a sense of feeling they were deeply loved and intimately known by their teachers. One student commented that his teachers "were like second parents."

One key element for this theme of teacher-to-student connectivity was a sense of relationship building by teachers, which went beyond academics. One student expressed her belief that her teachers "truly cared about who you are as a person and not just as a student." In addition, students noted the importance of *relationship opportunities*, with teachers, due to school size. Supporting this theme of the connection between school size and developing strong relationships with teachers, a current junior in college shared, "it did help that it was a smaller school; it was very easy to make those relationships with our teachers." In addition to school size, students also referenced the benefit of class size in connection with knowing their teachers and feeling known. A former student, now in a post-college career, supported the importance of class size by stating, "I think my relationships with teachers were a little more relaxed in that environment because it was so interpersonal and the class environment was so small." Moreover,

when asked an open-ended question concerning students' first response in defining or describing their classical Christian education, students often *first* responded with commentary concerning relationships with teachers and small classes. One student commented, "I guess, looking at small classes, personal time with teachers, and that's the very kind of first thing that I think about. Very personal, just that emphasis on relational." Researcher Jared L. Squires (2019) found, in a dissertation study addressing how students in classical Christian schools *described* their lived experiences, an essential theme of *faculty modeling* of Christian sacrifice and love. Students in this current study echoed Squires' (2019) findings of Christian paideia, or inculcation of Christian values, manifesting into students' future lives. In short, students perceived their teachers cared for them deeply within the small setting of the classical Christian school, and this level of caring continued in its impact beyond the K - 12 formative years.

Concerning the theme of relationships with teachers, students in the study often referenced the richness of their relationships with other students. Similar to relationships with teachers, student-based relationships were positively impacted by the school and class size. Squires (2019) also found in his research the same theme of relational intimacy among students. One student described this type of relational intimacy by sharing, "I would just say that we were all basically,like a family and still are; there was a lot of emphasis on relationships." As a by-product of the family-type atmosphere and small class size, students shared their perceptions of feeling *free* to participate in academic activities; this freedom was founded on how well they knew other students. A career level former student highlighted this view when he said, "I love small classes. I have learned so much better in small classes because I felt freer to voice my opinions."

The finding of strong relationships with faculty members and other students naturally flowed into students sharing their perceptions of feeling their education helped them both maintain past relationships (from their K - 12 school years) and form future relationships (college and career). A college student shared this perspective, "my relationships with my teachers have really impacted how I form relationships with people outside of my classical Christian school." In addition, students often shared how their close-knit relationships in high school have been maintained beyond the high school years. Squires (2019) also noted the influence of classical Christian education on relationships beyond the K - 12 experience.

This concept of relational intimacy (Squires, 2019) was not always positive. This finding was due in large part to the adverse effects of a small school and small class size. For example, a current college student shared, "I think sometimes for certain people, they might not be as lucky, like our class was pretty close. But for some people I know, just individuals who might have left the school because they didn't click with their class." While relational discord led to a maturing process for students via conflict resolution, some students felt the need to leave their school setting.

Themes regarding spiritual formation

Spiritual formation was also a strong theme within the study. Students often shared their perceptions of classical Christian education's profound impact on their personal Christian faith journey. Moreover, students discussed the depth of spiritual preparation they received concerning a biblical worldview and an ability to engage culture. However, these positive spiritual formation experiences also led some students to fear being too sheltered for future life experiences. This concern did manifest in the data captured from college and career students.

Spiritual formation is undoubtedly a goal for all classical Christian schools (Perrin, 2004; Turley, 2014; Wilson, 1996; Clark & Johnson &Sloat, 1991). As a global theme, students' perceptions confirmed their classical Christian schools' success in impacting their spiritual development. Some students shared their belief that the classical Christian school experience had advanced their spiritual growth even beyond their church experiences.

A core sub-theme within the global theme of spiritual formation was how *personal* it felt to students. One student described it by saying, "well, we definitely go deep. We have chapel every week, so not only does it teach us about certain instances in the Bible, but it goes deeper into them and explains a deeper spiritual meaning." This sub-theme of personal transformation was often connected to both classroom instruction in Bible and spiritual activities such as chapels and retreats. The potential impact for personal spiritual transformation was best captured in this statement from a career-level student, "I don't even know if I would be a Christian had I not gone to a classical Christian school."

Biblical worldview instruction was also presented as a constant sub-theme among all focus group levels. This finding aligned with Melody K. Smith's (2020) study on the impact of K - 12 classical Christian education on spiritual formation. Smith's study highlighted student perceptions regarding the Bible as a constant source of truth. This type of biblical worldview education is best summarized by a current student who shared, "in Bible, we talked a lot about worldview and culture; it gave me a perspective of what other people believe." Students also agreed that biblical worldview application had occurred across all subjects.

However, students also shared negative perceptions of their biblical worldview education. While students felt their education was *equipping* them with a biblical worldview, they also felt their classical Christian school setting somewhat limited their opportunities to *apply* what they

were learning. One student shared this sentiment by stating, "we do not have much practice with other people challenging our faith." This was due, possibly, to the amount of time students spent in school and to the small size of the schools. Also, some students perceived that a biblical worldview was sometimes forced. A senior in high school shared this perspective by saying, "I have seen that we were forced to make something Christian that does not quite fit."

An additional sub-theme captured in the study was students' sense of feeling prepared to leverage their education by engaging with others. Goodwin's (2020) *Good Soil Report* also researched classical Christian school students' perceptions concerning their ability to engage or influence culture. Goodwin found classical Christian students possessed a healthier outlook on life and engagement with culture, and students in this study also felt they were spiritually prepared to engage.

However, it is important to note that the results also indicated a sub-theme of students feeling somewhat sheltered by their K - 12 education. Specifically, younger students reported feeling prepared spiritually, while seniors in high school expressed some concern with being too sheltered before entering college. College and career respondents shared they often *did feel* a sense of culture shock after moving on to a college setting. One student shared, "it's a totally different world when you are out of your Jesus bubble, especially if you have been sent to a small classical Christian school all of your life. When your Jesus bubble is popped, you have no idea what to do." In short, as students progressed to their senior year of high school, they perceived they might not be as prepared as they previously thought. After experiencing a sense of culture shock post-high school, a career-level student shared, "I wish some of the difficult things of life were talked about in light of God's word – sin and struggles with addiction."

Themes regarding academic preparation

Turley (2014) noted that classical Christian education is built upon a model of *educational paideia*. This educational philosophy is holistic and formational. Students in the study often noted the distinctive types of educational activities utilized to achieve this sense of educational paideia: open discussion, scored discussion, public speaking, writing, and critical thinking. Students perceived these types of interactive learning modalities prepared them well for college, and their overall academic expectations and workload were perceived as helpful in their academic preparation.

However, students in this study did distinguish between *feeling prepared* for future courses in humanities versus feeling prepared for future courses in math or science curricula. As a sub-theme of academic preparation, seniors and college or career participants felt sufficiently prepared for college-level humanities courses. Some students even shared perceptions of being *over prepared* for college-level coursework in humanities. However, participants also shared perceptions that indicated they did not feel adequately prepared for college math and science coursework. This distinction between humanities and math or science was consistent in the data. A college junior stated this perception succinctly when she shared, "something my school could not provide was a good science program." This perception was grounded in the realities of a small school and limited resources. A current senior in high school said, "even the honors math track is not as challenging as some of the other classes in public schools."

The sub-theme of classical learning modalities, such as intense writing exercises, class discussions, public speaking, and Socratic seminars were viewed as valuable for academic preparation. A freshman student captured this sense of feeling academically prepared for the future when she said, "I think I will be more prepared for college, because right now, we write a

lot of essays, and we don't learn by multiple choice or true and false." College and career students who viewed themselves as marginal writers from high school referenced their writing skills as superior to many of their college classmates. In addition to their writing requirements, students placed a high value on the amount of preparation they received in public speaking. A career-level student reflected, "when I started college and I was in a communications class, I didn't have a problem at all with standing up and talking in front of people." This confidence for public speaking resulted from the frequency and intensity of public speaking required at school. Students also often referenced their academic preparation in relation to their experiences with everyday classroom conversations with their teachers and with each other. The learning activities are all consistent with Dorothy Sayers (1947) essay *The Lost Tools of Learning*. In the essay, Sayers outlined the stages of learning and the accompanying activities necessary for a well-trained mind in the classical tradition. The impact of Sayers' work and the subsequent formation of the schools within the study presented in the students' perceptions of what they had learned and *how* their academic preparation turned them into learners. In a more contemporary study, Mitchell (2019) noted how a classical education prepared students by equipping them "by the pedagogy and in the pedagogy" (p. 148).

A final sub-theme for academic preparation was the perceptions of students concerning expectations and workload. The reading and writing requirements, from students' perceptions, were viewed as substantial. Classical Christian educator Douglas Wilson (1996), when discussing the *density* of requiring students to read great works of literature, wrote the difficulty is not the literature, it is "in ourselves" (p. 175). Students in this study reported they were required to work hard, to grapple with difficult material, and to meet teachers' high expectations. A junior in college captured the perceived benefit of high expectations and workload by sharing,

"one thing that I could not stand in high school that I am very thankful for now is the workload that we were given." A freshman student stated he felt "almost over-prepared for college."

Themes regarding enjoyment of education

A core claim of contemporary classical Christian education is the necessity of trivium-based education to ensure students *enjoy* their education. Philosophically, this view is rooted in Dorothy Sayer's (1947) essay *The Lost Tool of Learning*. The core belief is students move through three levels of learning: the grammar stage, the logic stage, and the rhetoric stage. By teaching in ways that match where students are developmentally, enjoyment of education increases (Wilson, 1996). Students in this study shared their perceptions of their enjoyment of a classical Christian education which was formed around pedagogical convictions for trivium-based instruction.

Within the global theme of enjoyment of education, a sub-theme identified in the study was the connection between *the classroom experience* and overall enjoyment of education. Students noted class discussions as an enjoyable part of their education; when reflecting on his enjoyment of his education, one student said it was "an open education; you were allowed to ask questions; you were not going to be made fun of if you do not know something." Another student echoed this sentiment of an open discussion education by stating, "here, I feel I can be open with my friends and with my teachers." These responses indicated a successful implementation of classical dialogue within the schools in the study.

Students also referenced their close connection with teachers as a big factor in their enjoyment of school. One student reflected on this positive teacher impact:

> So, you know, all of the students had a very close relationship with all of the teachers. And I really **enjoyed** that. Just being able to have an actual personal relationship with

> each of my teachers rather than being in a class with maybe 50 other students where, you know, you don't really get the chance to know your teachers.

As reported earlier in this summary, this finding in the data was tethered to school and class size. However, the size of the environment was not the singular factor in this sub-theme. Students also noted their teachers' love for the subject positively impacted their enjoyment of education. Teachers' passion for pursuing the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness (Turley, 2014) filtered down to their students across all groupings.

The final sub-theme of students' enjoyment of their education was the sub-theme of *lack of enjoyment* in the classical Christian school experience. This portion of the data set came primarily from the college and career grouping who had the distinct advantage of reflectingon their previous educational experiences. College and career participants expressed this reflective attitude by noting they *did not* enjoy their education *as it was happening.* However*,* after completing their high school education, they were thankful their parents required them to remain in a classical Christian school setting. This perception is well connected to Rebekah Merkle's belief that hosts of students from classical Christian schools "have wandered off into the sunset after graduation, and several years down the road have suddenly noticed how very useful their education is proving to be" (Merkle, 2017, p. 11). Concerning this sense of delayed benefit, a current college student shared, "I hated it; I hated it pretty much up until my day of graduation. But now I am so thankful for my parents' perseverance and pushing me to stay at my school." A career-level student articulated this perspective by recounting a conversation he had with his father.

> I am thankful, now, that my parents forced me to stay. I do remember a handful of conversations with my dad. You know, at the time, I was ready to go to the public school.

> But I am thankful that my parents kind of gave me an ultimatum and were, like, NO, you are staying in your current school.

The rhetorical overlay of these perceptions from graduates of classical Christian schools was rooted in the *future value* of a classical Christian education's distinctive experience.

Discussion of Findings

This portion of the study will provide insights and suggestions for stakeholders in classical Christian schools. These critical areas of focus may serve school leaders, teachers, and parents as they strive to understand the impact of this distinct model of education. The core areas of discussion are: (1) the importance of relationships, (2) success in spiritual formation (3) the impact of school size, (4) the need for academic encouragement, (5) math and science, (6) biblical worldview instruction, and (7) transition to college.

The Importance of Relationships

While the study's findings concerning *the importance of relationships* were not completely unexpected, the frequency and degree of responses oriented to this theme *was* unexpected. Also, the most salient characteristic of this domain was the positive relational impact of teachers on students. It is important to note that Merante's research (2019), which focused on stakeholder motivation concerning classical Christian schools, found that adult stakeholders held perceptions of disapproval of mainstream educational philosophies and the approval of classical Christian school philosophy; these areas were important for parents selecting a classical Christian education. However, the study did not uncover any themes concerning rich *relationships* with teachers as a primary motivation for parents seeking out a classical Christian education.

Findings in this study's data are significant for three main reasons. One, while Christian parents may be seeking this type of educational experience for their children due to worldview or

academic concerns with other educational models, the students in this study communicated their relationships with their teachers was their primary concern. Students described their teachers as friends, mentors, and cheerleaders. Also, students shared their experiences of feeling their teachers continued to care for them and know them beyond graduation. This level of relationship is a necessity for carrying out Turley's (2014) concept of educational *paideia*. Two, this finding should be a great encouragement to those laboring in classical Christian schools. However, in that encouragement, classical Christian educators must remember education is always happening within the context of a relationship, and students perceived it was healthy and beneficial to have relationships with their teachers, which left a lasting mark on them. Therefore, teachers should labor to protect this vital domain. While some schools may feel this type of relational strength is both organic and ongoing, growing schools should consider what systems are in place to ensure rich relationships with teachers continue to develop as enrollment develops. Finally, as classical Christian school leaders approach parents in their communities, the potential value of relationships, for students, within the school structure is a marketable school feature. Small schools are often desired for their academic impact; this study's findings highlighted relationships with teachers and other students as a valuable outcome for students.

Success in Spiritual Formation

Students' perceptions concerning the role of spiritual formation in their school experience were primarily positive. As a nascent movement, classical Christian education has a stated purpose of providing students with an education that is Christ-centered and gospel-focused (Perrin, 2004; Turley, 2014; Wilson, 1996; Mitchell, 2018; Smith, 2020; Clark & Johnson & Sloat, 1991). Students in this study shared perceptions of their school's successes in this critical domain. An important feature for this perception of success was the small school setting and

small classes. Teachers in Bible classes and other subject areas were able to invest in their students ' spiritual development heavily, and students within these schools perceived the impact of personal spiritual activity and interaction as transformational. A career-level student poignantly stated this: "I don't even know if I would be a Christian had I not attended my classical Christian school." In short, a primary result of this investigative study yielded self-report perceptions from students, which indicated the participant schools are having and continuing to have a positive spiritual impact on students.

While an individual self-report necessarily generates perceptions of spiritual impact gleaned from students' stories, schools should consider doing more to capture the ongoing impact of their attempt to provide educational *paideia*. As more qualitative data concerning spiritual impact is formulated, schools should consider following up with students via targeted surveys containing questions centered on graduates' spiritual vitality and faith life. It is important to note that college and career students often felt their former teachers actively stayed connected with students post-high school; however, as smaller schools grow, this type of organic connection will be harder to maintain. Therefore, as small classical Christian schools continue to develop and grow enrollment, more systematic ways of staying connected to graduates will need to be developed. Finally, the findings implied an intensity and consistency of effort from teachers to ensure they were positively impacting students' spiritual lives. This type of spiritual and emotional investment is what Mitchell (2018) noted as "the passing on of truth from one generation to the next" (p. 34). This type of endeavor has the capability of emotionally and spiritually draining teachers. Classical Christian schools should consider creating forums for teachers to hear from their former students about their impact. Likewise, school leaders should give great attention to how they are professionally preparing and ministering to their faculty

members. Christian school teachers cannot continue to give to their students without replenishing their spiritual reserves. As a wisdom application, schools should consistently review and refresh their plans to develop their teachers in the domain of spiritual formation.

The Impact of School Size

Squires (2019) found in his qualitative research a theme of relational intimacy among students. Students in this study also shared their perceptions of building connected relationships within very small schools and classes. It is important to highlight the larger size of one of the schools included in the study; this school was double the other two schools' size. However, students from the larger school also made note, in much the same way as students from the smaller schools, of feeling very connected.

As a general category, classical Christian schools should consider tracking, as their enrollment grows, this category of relational intimacy. Students in the study often shared how personal their education felt. This highlighted feature can easily be missed or overlooked as schools address other issues such as curriculum or extra-curricular. This personal, intimate education model was also tethered to students' sense of their *enjoyment* of their education. As developing schools strive to offer more classes and more opportunities to students, great consideration should be given to how growing numbers will potentially alter students' experiences overall.

The Need for Academic Encouragement

A classical Christian education's academic rigor functions as a core value for the overall educational model (Turley, 2014; Wilson, 1996; Squires, 2019; Goodwin, 2020). Both current and former students in this study reported their perceptions of their education prepared them for academic, spiritual, and life success. However, current students often noted the difficulty and

intensity of their academic endeavors. While these younger students also shared their sense of feeling *prepared* by their educational journey, they did note the experience could, at times, feel overwhelming. This academic intensity was confirmed by college and career students who used words such as *over prepared* or *a step back* when comparing their college experience with their high school experience. While classical Christian schools may feel affirmed by feedback concerning students' perceptions of feeling over prepared for college, it is also true these schools need to *maintain* these students emotionally, spiritually, and academically in the years leading up to college. When students share some college classes' perceptions being easier than their high school classes, schools should consider revisiting their expectations and overall workload. Moreover, from a rhetorical standpoint, it may be of benefit for schools to create forums for graduates to speak directly to current students concerning the future academic benefits for college success. Students in the study cited teachers' proclamations concerning the future benefits of their educational experiences. However, this type of polemic would be much more effective coming from the *former students themselves*. Schools should consider creating structures for former students to encourage current students to pursue a classical Christian education.

Also, schools should take encouragement from the voices of their graduates. College and career respondents perceived they were ready for college's academic challenges and the real-world challenges of a career. While schools can utilize quantitative measures, such as ACT scores, to market their particular education model, qualitative research from former students is potentially equally compelling when considering the total impact of an educational model. Students in this study, via their perceptions, echoed Goodwin's (2020) assertion that students from ACCS schools are prepared to achieve an undergraduate degree.

Math and Science

Although students felt prepared by their humanities education, they did not share the same sense of readiness in math and science domains. This finding was somewhat evident in high school seniors and very prevalent in the college and career focus groups. As noted by Shawn Barnett (2019), classical Christian's modern-day form is different from historical classical Christian education. This difference is primarily rooted in classical languages being of much greater importance in antiquity. However, modern classical schools emphasize elements such as Latin instruction and "great books" programs (Wilson, 1996). This type of educational philosophy *does* place a heavy emphasis on *humanities* instruction. While classical schools espouse a holistic view of education that eschews thoughts of dividing education into "subjects" of study, classical Christian schools heavily emphasize the written, spoken, and cultivated word. This lean toward humanities showed up in college and career students' *perceptions* of feeling prepared for their college math and science courses versus feeling prepared for their humanities classes. Some of these perceptions were oriented to students feeling as if their schools simply did not have the resources or the facilities to pursue math and science instruction at the same level as the humanities. However, it is essential to note that the larger school in the study possesses significantly more facilities and resources. Yet, students still reported this gap in humanities education and math or science education. This gap may also be the result of limitations, due to school size, within the area of course selection in math and science instruction.

While this study did not attempt to ascertain all of the reasons students perceived a *less substantial* education within the disciplines of math and science, students certainly have a self-narrative and perception that their humanities education was superior to their math or science education. This finding in the qualitative data should, at a minimum, create some reflection for

small classical Christian schools. Classical Christian schools present to the community as champions of an educational paideia that focuses on the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness (Turley, 2014). In short, the educational model strives to serve *students* and not *the market*. However, classical Christian schools find themselves firmly planted in a Western educational market that is dominated by concerns with STEM learning. Considering these realities, schools should consider two categories of planning for the domains of math and science. Schools need to have clearly defined goals and objectives for resource allocation for math and science programs, and these goals and objectives need to fit with the schools' overall curriculum and enrollment plans. Two, what is the narrative classical Christian schools want to present to their communities concerning instruction in math, science, and STEM endeavors? School leaders need to possess clarity in where their schools are going in these areas, but they equally need clarity in how they plan to narrate those plans to future stakeholders. As presented in this study from the perspective of students, the current narrative is one of subtraction and not addition (in terms of educational value).

Biblical Worldview Instruction

Students in the study often shared their perceptions of receiving biblical worldview instruction across the curriculum. Smith's (2020) study on classical Christian schools affirmed schools' influence to leverage biblical worldview instruction to give students a strong faith foundation. This study found students who also affirmed the impact of a biblically-based education. However, as a word of caution, some students also shared perceptions of biblical worldview instruction being *stretched* in a way that sometimes seemed unnatural concerning their academic classes. Christian schools should take great care to protect the meaningful application of biblical worldview considerations within Christian school classrooms. Schoolsrisk

losing the impact of comparative Bible instruction if students perceive biblical worldview instruction is too forced or not applicable. Classical Christian schools should consider more professional development opportunities to help teachers discern the difference between healthy biblical worldview integrations and what may seem too stretched for students.

Transition to College

Merkle (2017) noted how students from classical Christian schools often note, after entering college, how beneficial their education was in preparing them for a successful transition. Students' perceptions in this study echoed Merkle's assertions. College and career students reported feeling prepared for the future. However, the overall educational approach of focusing on truth, beauty, and goodness (Turley, 2014) left some college and career respondents with experiences of culture shock when moving from high school to college. This finding was pronounced as it even manifested among students moving from their classical Christian school setting to Christian colleges. This culture shock type was oriented to exposure to new settings that included foul language, drugs, and sex. While some college and career respondents expressed thanksgiving for a sheltering environment, they suggested taking the concept of college preparation and a biblical lens together to tackle difficult subject areas *before* students enter college. This raises the questions concerning where ultimate authority lies with these types of difficult topics. Parents? The school? As a practical suggestion, schools should consider two options to address this area. Schools could (a) create parent forums to make parents *aware* of these perceptions among graduates and provide biblical counsel to prepare parents for these conversations or, (b) craft a curriculum within their Bible departments for seniors; the curriculum would be discussion-based within the tradition of rhetoric level instruction.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the self-report nature of individual responses from focus group participants. No data, such as observations or artifacts, were collected beyond the perceptions-based student responses; therefore, no verification for students' responses was gathered. Also, this study was regionally located. Classical Christian school respondents from other parts of the United States may share different perceptions than those represented in this localized study.

Conclusions

This study's major conclusion is the intensity of impact on students generated by the schools represented in the study. Students shared their perceptions of being profoundly impacted both spiritually and academically by their education. This conclusion should generate both encouragement and sobriety. As the schools represented in the study labor to manifest their educational philosophy, students' narrative indicated success in that endeavor. However, to whom much is given, much is required. As these schools move forward with their educational vision, it is paramount to hear from students, consider their perceptions and experiences, and then calculate how to serve those students better.

Students' perceptions concerning their teachers were nothing short of moving, and the gathered data presented how deep this type of education is going with students, especially at the level of affective domain learning. In this sense, the perceptions of these students reinforced the conviction concerning the most essential element of a student's education: the teacher. Students in the study used words such as love, respect, and honor in relation to their teachers. Also, student's responses, via their perceptions of their classical Christian education, indicated the concept of Christian Paideia was indeed occurring. Students felt they were educated in truth, beauty, and goodness.

Recommendations for Practice

While the overall presentation of students' perceptions of their classical Christian education was positive, there are areas highlighted within the data which indicate improvement areas. At the school level, a healthy response to students' voices will provide schools with an opportunity to serve their students at a higher level within the overall pursuit of classical Christian school paideia. The following are practice recommendations:

- Growing schools should consider what systems are in place to ensure rich relationships with teachers continue to develop as enrollment develops.
- In a marketing sense, schools should consider ways to accentuate the capability of the classical Christian school setting to provide rich relationships for students.
- As more qualitative data concerning spiritual impact is formulated, schools should consider following up with students via targeted surveys containing questions centered on graduates' spiritual vitality and faith life.
- As small classical Christian schools continue to develop and to grow enrollment, schools need to develop avenues to stay connected with graduates.
- Classical Christian schools should consider creating forums for teachers to hear from their former students about the impact they have had.
- School leaders should give great attention to how they are professionally preparing and ministering to their faculty members.
- Schools should consistently review and refresh their plans to develop their teachers in the domain of spiritual formation.

- As developing schools strive to offer more classes and more opportunities to students, consideration should be given to how growing numbers will potentially alter students' experiences overall.
- Schools should consider revisiting their expectations and overall workload.
- Schools should create forums for graduates to speak directly to current students concerning the future academic benefits for college success.
- Schools should consider creating structures for former students to encourage current students to pursue a classical Christian education.
- Schools should take encouragement from the voices of their graduates.
- Schools need to have clearly defined goals and objectives for resource allocation for math and science programs, and these goals and objectives need to fit with the schools' overall curriculum and enrollment plans.
- Schools need to develop a narrative for their school communities concerning instruction in math, science, and STEM endeavors.
- Christian schools should take great care to protect the meaningful application of biblical worldview considerations within Christian school classrooms.
- Schools should plan to help seniors in high school transition into college without experiencing significant culture shock; this could be accomplished via parent education or coursework for seniors within the Bible curriculum.
- Classical Christian schools should consider more professional development opportunities to help teachers discern the difference between healthy biblical worldview integrations and what may seem too stretched for students.

Recommendations for further study

- Research is needed concerning students' perceptions specific to their *enjoyment* of classical Christian education.
- Research students' perceptions of relationships as school enrollment grows. What happens within the domain of teacher-to-student relationships? Student-to-student relationships?
- Research the longevity and quality of teacher-to-student relationships or student-to-student relationships for classical Christian school graduates.
- Research professional development in classical Christian schools for spiritual formation.
- Research students' perceptions of biblical worldview impact.
- Research students' perceptions of "culture shock" when leaving classical Christian schools and entering college.
- Research students' experiences, via a case study, of "culture shock" when leaving classical Christian schools and entering college.
- Research college and career students' perceptions of "gaps" in their education.
- Research, within a quantitative methodology, graduates' performance in math or science-related college and career fields.
- Research, within a qualitative methodology, graduates' perceptions of their classical Christian schooling for math and science related fields.
- Conduct a mixed-methods study investigating students' perceptions of academic workload and actual academic workload.
- Conduct research on the spiritual vitality and faith lives of classical Christian school graduates.

Summary

This study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their classical Christian education in selected classical Christian schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. All three schools in the study serve primarily rural school areas; two of the schools reside in Tennessee, and one school resides in Virginia. The study participants included Ninth Grade (freshman), 12th grade (seniors), college, and career students from classical Christian schools. The study provided great insight into students' perceptions of the distinct form of education they received as K - 12 students. These perceptions were captured by conducting focus group interviews with students at each level represented within the study. Results included students' perceptions, both positive and negative, concerning relationship formation, spiritual formation, and academic preparation.

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Appendix A

Milligan IRB Approval Letter

MILLIGAN
UNIVERSITY

Date: November 14, 2020

From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan University

Re: *An Investigation of Students' Perceptions of Classical and Christian Education at Selected Classical and Christian Schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia*

Submission type: Expedited Review – Documentation from Cooperating Institutions

Dear Dustin Williams:

On behalf of the Milligan University Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are writing to inform you that your study, *An Investigation of Students' Perceptions of Classical and Christian Education at Selected Classical and Christian Schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia*, has been approved as expedited. This approval also indicates that you have fulfilled the IRB requirements for Milligan University.

All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission, meaning that you will follow the research plan you have outlined here, use approved materials, and follow university policies.

Take special note of the following important elements of your approval:

- Any changes made to your study require approval from the IRB Committee before they can be implemented as part of your study. Contact the IRB Committee at **IRB@milligan.edu** with your questions and/or proposed modifications.
- If there are any unanticipated problems or complaints from participants during your data collection, you must notify the Milligan University IRB Office within 24 hours of the data collection problem or complaint.
- Your Milligan IRB Approval Code is: MU2011141420

The Milligan University IRB Committee is pleased to congratulate you on the approval of your research proposal. Best wishes as you conduct your research! If you have any questions about your IRB Approval, please contact the IRB Office and copy your faculty advisor if appropriate on the communication.

On behalf of the IRB Committee,

Trini Rangel, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Milligan University

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Questions Guide

1. How would you describe or define the classical Christian education you received?
2. Discuss relationships within the context of your classical Christian education.
3. What are your perceptions of spiritual formation at school?
4. What are your perceptions of the benefits and challenges of a classical Christian education? Have you enjoyed your education?
5. What are your perceptions of how a classical Christian education has or has not prepared you for success in academics? In life?
6. What is your perception of wanting or not wanting a classical Christian education for your own children?
7. What is your current age and grade level as a student?
8. What is your definition of a classical education?
9. Tell me about your classical education.
10. Do you enjoy the classical approach to education?
11. Give me an example of something you value in your classical education.
12. Give me an example of something you have found challenging in classical education.
13. What is it or was it like for you to be in a classical school?
14. Tell me about your classical learning activities.
15. Were those helpful to you? Why or why not?
16. What value do you place on the classical approach in your education?
17. Do you feel that the classical approach has caused you to “miss out” on anything in your education?

18. Do you feel your classical education is preparing you for academic success? Why or why not?
19. How do you feel classical education is preparing you for life?
20. What is your definition of a Christian education?
21. Tell me about your Christian education.
22. Do you enjoy the Christian approach to education?
23. Give me an example of something you value in your Christian education.
24. Give me an example of something you have found challenging in your Christian education.
25. What is it or was it like for you to be in a Christian school?
26. Tell me about learning activities that were Christian focused.
27. Were those helpful to you? Why or why not?
28. What value do you place on your Christian education?
29. Do you feel that a Christian education has caused you to "miss out" on anything in your education?
30. Do you feel that your Christian education has prepared you for academic success? Why or why not?
31. How do you feel Christian education is preparing you for life?

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in Research Form

As a participant in this research study, you are invited to participate in focus group and personal interviews designed to investigate students' perceptions of classical and Christian education in selected schools in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. This consent form is part of an overall research study process called *informed consent*. The goal of the form is to ensure that you, as a participant, understand the study before deciding to take part in the proposed study.

This study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate researcher named Dustin Williams; the researcher is a current elementary school principal at a classical and Christian school titled Providence Academy in Johnson City, Tennessee. This study is a separate project for the researcher; the researcher is not representing Providence Academy for this study.

Background Information

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate students' perceptions of their classical and Christian education. The study is designed to interview students via focus groups and personal interviews from the Ninth Grade, 12thGrade, early college, and post college.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in the proposed study, you will be asked to participate in the following activities:

Possible one-on-one interviews

Possible focus group interview

Voluntary Nature of the Study

This study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not participate will be respected. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw or stop participation at any time.

Risks or Benefits of Being in the Study

Participating in this type of study involves some risk of minor discomforts encountered in most activities of daily life: fatigue and stress. Participating in the study would not pose a risk to your safety or overall well-being.

This study will benefit school stakeholders by providing an opportunity for current and former classical and Christian students to share their perceptions of the specific type of education they received. In short, this study will allow students to tell their own stories concerning their educational experiences.

Payment

There will be no monetary or gift payment for participation in the study.

Privacy

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Your personal information will not be used for any purpose outside of the research project. Any collected data will be kept secure via password protection and / or a locked cabinet. Data will be kept for a period of three years, as required by Milligan University.

Contacts and Questions

As a participant, you may ask any questions you have prior to the interview sessions. In addition, you may contact the researcher at: dwilliams@providenceacademy.com. Should you desire to talk privately with someone concerning your rights as a participant in this study, other than the researcher, you may contact the Milligan University Institutional Review Board at IRB@milligan.edu. In addition, you may contact Milligan's Director of Educational Research at Milligan University: 423-461-8744.

Statement of Consent

I have read the provided information, and I feel I understand the nature and purpose of the study well enough to make an informed decision concerning my willingness to participate in the proposed study. My signature below indicates that I am agreeing to the terms and information provided above.

Printed Name of Participant_____

Date of Informed Consent_____

Participant's Signature_____

Parent / Legal Guardian Signature if under 18_____

Researcher's Signature_____