

Rivers of a Living Education

By Vernard T. Gant

A Persistent Need

There are millions of school-age children in this nation and around the world who are academically disenfranchised, culturally diverse and disesteemed, and economically disadvantaged. The persistent challenge is how to effectively educate a child who:

- Underperforms academically or has learning challenges
- Comes from culturally different social, racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds.
- Lives in economically low and/or moderate-income families.

We call them A.C.E. children for short. Education is the greatest hope for an effective and successful life for these A.C.E. children, yet most do not learn well in the schools they attend. This is true even though many A.C.E. students are in well-resourced schools with highly qualified educators utilizing proven pedagogical practices. For several decades, billions of dollars and multiple school reform efforts have failed to improve the plight of A.C.E. children.

The plight of A.C.E. children can be likened to the poor and needy depicted in Isaiah 41:17.

*The poor and needy seek water, but there is none,
Their tongues fail for thirst.*

Just as the tongue fails for lack of water, the lives of A.C.E. children fail for lack of an effective education. These children have limited access to Christian schools, but they have not been written out of the Christian education equation. To believe so is to make the error of *not know[ing] the Scriptures nor the power of God.* (Mark 12:24) It is natural to assume that in the matter of an education, the things of God are spatially/geographically bound.

The woman of Samaria made a similar assumption. She was thirsty, and Jesus offered her living water. She asked, “Where then do You get that living water?” (John 4:11) She rightly concluded that it had to come from God. Her mistake, however, was in thinking that it was geographically dependent.

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship. (20)

She asked “where”; but it was a really a matter of “Who.” Jesus corrected her by stating:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (23, 24)

He pointed out that the things of God are internal to His people and not external to places. For example:

*Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the **kingdom of God is within you.**” (Luke 17:20, 21)*

God's Solution for the Thirsty

*I, the LORD, will hear them;
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
(Isaiah 41:18)*

A theme found throughout Scriptures is how God uses the weak, lowly, and disregarded things to overcome the biggest challenges. He used David to defeat Goliath (I Sam. 17), a young boy's lunch to feed the hungry multitude (John 6), and a humble girl to bring the promised Messiah to the earth (Luke 1:46-54). God has already prepared, positioned, and purposed a mighty army to take up the challenge of educating A.C.E. children.

Academically poor and needy children need to have their educational thirst quenched. The God who loves them above measure can satisfy their parched academic lives through educators dedicated to Him who are equipped to deliver a transformational education.

Research has highlighted that many teacher's motivation comes from their own religious affiliation. While they carefully separate their own beliefs from their teaching, it often influences their "pedagogical approach" which addresses the "holistic development of students." (Eckert 2011)

These transformational educators are already in public, charter, and private schools throughout our nation, but their full power and potential has not yet been realized.

Three-Dimensional Education (The Water)

A transformational education is three-dimensional and holds out the greatest promise for effectively educating A.C.E. children because it is holistic in nature. It is three-dimensional in that it is:

- Informational, (Head) equipping children with the subject content necessary for academic success,
- Instructional, (Hands) educating children in a manner that promotes learning, and
- Inspirational, (Heart) engaging the heart of the child in the learning process.

A two-dimensional education that is largely informational and instructional is adequate for some children but inadequate for many children and particularly for poor and needy children. Again, for these children a three-dimensional education is transformative.

Three-Dimensional Educators (The Waterers)

*I will open rivers in desolate heights,
And fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
And the dry land springs of water. (Isaiah 41:18)*

God uses two primary methods to supply water to the thirsty:

- Pools and fountains
- Rivers and streams

Pools and fountains are fixed delivery sources; rivers and streams are fluid. One requires that the thirsty go to the source of the water (pools and fountains); with the other, the water flows to where the thirsty are (streams and rivers). God is not bound by either; His only concern is to get the water to the thirsty. Pools and fountains represent a fixed institutional source for supplying the needs of educationally thirsty children (Christian schools). It requires that children go to the schools regulated by Christian educators to have their thirst quenched. Rivers and streams represent a fluid incarnational source for supplying the needs of educationally thirsty children. It is represented by Christian educators supplying the needs of educationally thirsty children in the schools they attend that are regulated by others (public schools). The fact is, the water of God is inherent within His people. He is not a fountain or pool bound God.

He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.
(John 7:38 NKJV)

A three-dimensional education that quenches the thirst of the poor and needy is delivered by transformative, three-dimensional educators. Movies, books, and testimonies about educators who made a profound impact upon students are reflections of the heart dimension in education. These educators succeed with children where others have given up or failed.

Three-dimensional educators are holistic in their approach to teaching because they have the:

- Information in their heads that their students need. 🧠
- Instructional ability with their hands to impart the information to their students. 🙌
- Inspiration in their hearts to connect with their students and spur them to achieve. ❤️

The heart dimension engages the basic tenets of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) which is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL teaches children self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2019). It encourages the teacher's ability to self-monitor his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions especially in the context of teaching diverse populations of learners. Research has shown that the teacher's ability to integrate SEL components into the learning environment is foundational to the success or failure of the learning process. This is the essence of *heart learning*. It pertains to the heart of the educator which engages the heart of the child. Matters of the heart are spiritual in nature and cannot be programmed, operationalized, or systematized; they can only be cultivated. The seed for heart learning is inherent in the people of God because the love of God abides in their hearts (Romans 5:5).

Three-Dimensional Educational Outcomes (The Watered)

*The LORD will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.*
(Isaiah 58:11 NKJV)

A three-dimensional education taught by three-dimensional educators will result in three-dimensional student outcomes. Students who are:

- Informed in their heads with what they should know 🧠
- Inspired in their hearts to believe ❤️
- Influenced in their hands to achieve and give 🙌

Children who are equipped scholastically in their heads and established spiritually in their hearts have the greatest propensity to engage socially in positive and productive ways. These children grow up having the willingness and the wherewithal to contribute to the public good. Instead of being in need, they are able to give to meet needs.

The Compelling Purpose

Isaiah describes the Lord's compassion and work in quenching the thirst of the poor and in overwhelming abundance. However, the prophet writes in verse 20, that meeting the expressed and essential needs is but a means to a greater end:

*That they may see and know,
And consider and understand together,
That the hand of the Lord has done this,
And the Holy One of Israel has created it.*
(Isaiah 41:20)

That the world may see and know, consider and understand, that the Lord, the Holy One, has transformed the lives of educationally thirsty children through His people.