

**Podcast: Good Enough Homeschool**

**Episode: Episode 8: Michael Clay Thompson (MCT) ELA**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

[00:00:00] [Sound of book pages being rapidly flipped.]

Courtney: [00:00:12] Hello! Welcome listeners, to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. On today's show, we'll talk about our question of the day, testing our homeschooled children. Then AJ is going to give us a classical education history lesson! And finally, we'll talk about MCT and what we love and what we don't love.

[00:00:30] The first question that we talked about came up in the SICT group and it was, "What kinds of tests should we give our kids and why should we test?"

[00:00:39] I thought this was a really smart question. I have given my kids all kinds of tests. When I first started out, when Gwen was tiny, we started out with those end of chapter tests. And that's fine for assessing whether or not they can perform the activities that you have taught them in that particular chapter. Whether or not that performance holds up in six months, whether they've actually learned it, I would say, is a different question.

[00:01:03] That's where those normed standardized academic tests come in. And normed tests are different. Those are the CAT, the TerraNova, the Stanford, the SmarterBalance, those MAP tests. The theory is, if you line up 100 kids from top to bottom, your normed tested child will fall somewhere in that line. It doesn't actually tell you how much they know, per se. What it tells you is how much they know related to their peers. That's why the age there is different. That's why, when you get those results back and it has a grade 6.7 and your child's in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, it doesn't mean that your child can do 6<sup>th</sup> grade work. What it means is that a 6<sup>th</sup> grader would have done as well as your child.

[00:01:45] These are the kind of tests that states use for those annual requirements because what states are interested in is not how much your individual child knows, but how the cohort of children as a whole is

doing compared to where they should be. If you're a state commissioner of education, that's what you're interested in.

[00:02:04] Because the information there is limited, what I find most useful are criterion-referenced academic tests like the Let's Go Learn ADAM and DORA. Now these are a little harder to find because they're not used as much. But what I like them for is assessing what your child knows compared to an external standard.

[00:02:23] Even though I'm a teacher, and I have classroom experience. It's still sometimes hard for me to think of how much my child actually knows, and how much they've retained over the course of a year. What they should know compared to what other kids in their grade should know. There's a couple caveats here. There are only national recognized standards for math and reading and the reading is primarily decoding. Any reading comprehension is kind of on two parts, your child's decoding ability, how well they know their phonics, and their background knowledge. One times the other will give you a really close equivalent of their reading comprehension ability. So you've got to take that DORA with a grain of salt.

[00:03:09] The math is one of those very few academic fields where they have well-designed, comprehensive, interlocking, really nitty-gritty standards for each grade level. And the ADAM is excellent for that because what it does is, it will tell you your child can add like fractions, but they cannot add like mixed numbers, for example. Really fine-grained detail. You get, like, 17 pages of results. Very helpful.

[00:03:39] Then there are the sort of tests that, if your child is in school and they suspect that your child might have a learning disability, they're going to say, we're going to do a whole bunch of evaluations. Those kind of tests come into two parts. One are intelligence tests, which are good for helping determine whether your child is gifted or whether your child has a learning disability, versus a normed achievement test. Now remember, both of these are normed. They don't actually say how much your child knows or what your child can do. What they do is compare them to their peers. And the achievement test is something like a Woodcock-Johnson.

[00:04:14] For a long time, one of the standard definitions of special education was that your child was smart enough to do the work, but for whatever reason their performance wasn't meeting their intellectual abilities and that gap there is how learning disabilities came to be defined. And they have all these sub areas. Now, of course, it's a little more complex, the legal standard has changed. But, schools will very

often still do those kinds of tests. Like, give your child an IQ test, they'll give your child an achievement test, and then they'll look at their work.

[00:04:49] And so these tests are pretty normal, pretty helpful. If you try and get this done as a homeschooler as I did, you can expect to pay anywhere from, depending on your insurance, anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars. We paid about \$2500 for a thorough educational psychological assessment. It was very useful. Tough emotionally, but useful.

[00:05:10] And then there are things that are more relevant to homeschoolers like curricula placement tests. So, for example, people are often asked where should my child be in Saxon, and of course, we refer them to the Saxon placement tests. So those are good for determining that right level of curricula for the student. It's less about what grade level your child is on and more about what your child knows and doesn't know and where you should start with them.

Jen: [00:05:36] So, I have a question before I give my two cents, for both of you. If you're classically educating from the beginning, the problem that I've had, I've given the TerraNova and I've given the CAT. I think I've given the Stanford once. When you get to the science and social studies sections on those, it often doesn't match our curriculum at all. I've always kind of discounted those portions because while science, I think, on those tests are almost more of a logic section than a science section, because you don't actually have to know anything about science. You do have to know how to read the graph, you do have to know how to read the information to read the questions. The social studies—

Courtney: [00:06:22] Is kind of a random hodge-podge...

AJ: [00:06:24] That's because it's how social studies is in the United States. It is a random hodge-podge.

Courtney: [00:06:28] There are national social studies standards. Each state in the United States makes their own standards by grade level and they can tweak those national standards as they want. Those are just optional, hanging out there, here they are if you like them. And states do. The standards are incredibly vague. Unbelievably, incredibly vague. So the way that Mrs. Smith on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor versus the way Mrs. Jones on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor interprets them, versus the way that the county school district down the road interprets them, versus the way the state next door interprets them are all going to be different. So when they start talking about these national standardized tests, that's why what they're really going for is that sort of logic testing. And so you can teach your child

how to take a test and that is a valuable skill. That's what public school students spend a lot of time doing. That's actually one of the reasons why I started homeschooling.

[00:07:24] One of the reasons, I think, that homeschoolers are often disconcerted when they get those standardized norm tests back, is they're like, oh, I feel like my child is doing okay academically. We have a pretty good sense of how our kids are doing generally. And yet their test scores are not where I think they should be. And I have to say, well, hold up. How much test prep are you doing? Because you can't compete with weeks and months of test prep.

AJ: [00:07:47] Nor should you. Really. Really. You don't want to get on that particular bus, you really don't.

Courtney: [00:07:54] Right! And I think in the long term it's actually detrimental to students, because remember what I just said about reading comprehension being the intertwining of background knowledge and decoding. Think about all that time they're not learning background knowledge. They're spending it in learning how to fill out bubble sheets. That gradual attrition grinds away at their base of knowledge that they're supposed to be learning in school until you end up with the sophomores in high school who can't identify the United States on a map.

[00:08:28] That is what I think about, Jen, when I think about science and social studies on tests.

Jen: [00:08:32] Okay. Well, good. Then I feel vindicated in my blasé attitude of I don't even care about how you did on those sections. The only thing that I guess I would add, is that, I mean some years I've heavily tested and some years I haven't. All my kids took standardized tests. With my daughter, who is my fourth child, I actually started her taking the ACT when she was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade because she was a pretty good test-taker but she had a lot of anxiety. So my thought was, if she started taking it then and went through the process a few times before it in any way counted then all of her outside factors would dissipate when it counted.

Courtney: [00:09:15] Did it help?

Jen: [00:09:15] I think so.

Courtney: [00:09:16] AJ, I loved that history lesson you gave us last time. Want to share a little bit more?

AJ:

[00:09:20] Sure. In our last episode, I talked about what's probably the most popular style of classical education among homeschoolers, and that's neoclassical education as represented by the Well Trained Mind and certain Christian classical publishers, like Classical Academic Press. So if you want the details on that, check out episode 7.

[00:09:40] But today, I'm going to look at the other major style of classical education that homeschoolers are likely to encounter, and that's traditional, or what's sometimes called Latin-centered classical ed. And this is much closer to what classical education meant up until the 1980s, and what many people outside the United States would still understand by that term even today.

[00:10:01] So, the *too long; didn't read* version is that traditional classical education uses the study of Latin and Greek, that is, the European classical languages, as its organizing principle. So just the way that the Well Trained Mind is structured around the four year history cycle, traditional classical education is all about mastering the classical languages and their literatures. It's an education in and through the classics of the ancient Mediterranean with some later great books added in.

[00:10:29] So in practice, this approach balances its strong language emphasis with equal parts of mathematics. So both Latin and math are cumulative and they require years to master. And traditional classical education is all about mastery. The motto of this style of education is *multum non multa*, meaning much but not many things. So the idea here is you want to go deep rather than broad with your curriculum choices. You focus on a few truly excellent books and you study them in depth. You're not going to find the big long lists that are in the Well Trained Mind. You're not going to have your kids reading dozens of books a year like you might in a literature-based program or in many Charlotte Mason-inspired programs.

[00:11:10] Instead, your child might spend a whole year just studying Homer and Virgil. And another year just on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Readings are chosen for their cultural influence and their moral lessons. The idea is that children's minds will be formed by years of exposure to the classical languages, the rigors of mathematics, and in the words of Matthew Arnold, "the best which has been thought and said."

[00:11:36] So the goal here is, we're going to borrow a phrase from the Jesuits here. "Formation not information." So the ancients saw classical education, or saw education generally, as not about getting ahead in the

world, about earning more money or being successful businesspeople, but about preserving and passing on their cultural norms.

[00:11:57] So the Greek word that we usually translate as education, *paideia*, which shows up in the name of all kinds of classical education companies and groups, actually means child-rearing. It's a much more comprehensive term than just schooling or education in that sense of schooling. And the Romans had this idea of the *mos maiorum*, which are the ancestral customs. These are the kind of unwritten norms of their culture and the way they pass those on was by having their children master a body of knowledge, and this is specifically literary knowledge. It was very traditional, very conservative, so that they would enter adulthood as bearers of their culture's deeply held values. And I would say the same is true for most of the Christians who are attracted to Latin-centered classical education today. They want a curriculum that is not only academically rigorous, but that also reinforces their social and political values as well as their theology.

[00:12:52] So the big name here, in the homeschooling world, is Memoria Press. There's also Kolbe, which is a Catholic company, but I'm assuming most of our secular listeners probably aren't as interested in them. Like Kolbe, Memoria Press was founded by Catholics, although they have always presented themselves as simply Christian, or in C.S. Lewis's terms, mere Christian, to appeal to the broader market. And I also see a Jesuit influence in their curriculum, but they don't really emphasize that. They are completely up front, though, about being culturally conservative, and promoting what they describe as the values of "Western Civilization." And listeners should be aware that this whole concept of "Western Civilization" is extremely problematic.

[00:13:35] I have some articles that we're going to link to in the show notes that explain a little bit about the history of that term. It's a much more recent term than many people know. It has a lot of—there's a lot of baggage there. Exactly. Yeah.

[00:13:49] There's also another article that shows how that term is actually being co-opted by the far right as we speak. So it's a difficult term and the fact that companies are choosing to use it, yeah, you gotta think about that.

[00:14:01] When Memoria Press was first getting started, they were pretty emphatic that really what all kids needed was Latin and math and everything else was gravy because that's the kind of education that our founders had, Thomas Jefferson, and all those folks, right? So over the years, though, they have moved away from that kind of hyper minimalist

program and my guess is that they realized that there was a demand for homeschooling curricula that were relatively simple and very traditional, but also still recognizable to modern people as a college preparatory curriculum.

[00:14:33] So over the last 10+ years, they've expanded their offerings to include science, although it's relatively light through middle school. It's more nature-study oriented, and also more history, although their history program is still very centered on European and North American history. There's almost nothing outside what we would call, perhaps, the Euro-centric realm there. And they are also now marketing, sort of school in a box type full curriculum packages. And they've also tapped the charter school market with these very lightly secularized product.

[00:15:03] To wrap up here, if you hear people talking about traditional or Latin-centered classical education, you can assume that they are prioritizing the classical languages, especially Latin and they probably stress math as well. The curriculum is going to be quite rigorous, but quite narrow in focus. History might be limited to western civilization, as opposed to the world history kind of approach that you see with the Well Trained Mind. Science, certainly before high school is likely to be fairly light. There's going to be a lot of memorization, lot of formal grammar, and the literature will be chosen not just for its cultural importance, but also for the moral lessons that it imparts.

[00:15:41] Some of us in the secular homeschooling world are looking for ways to preserve the positive aspects of this style of education, which I would say are its rigor and its simplicity, but without the cultural myopia and the retrogressive politics that you find attached to some of the curriculum out there.

[00:15:54] So I hope that helps people understand a little bit about that type of education, and as I said, we're going to have some links in the show notes that give a little bit of background about what Memoria Press, for example, emphasizes, and some of the things about this western civilization focus that are kind of problematic, particularly for progressive people. I hope that helps.

Courtney: [00:16:12] Yes. Thank you, AJ. One thing that I have noticed in looking at Memoria Press's catalogue, which are beautiful, by the way—

AJ: [00:16:19] They really are.

Courtney: [00:16:19] I love the way they're laid out—

Jen: [00:16:21] —the articles are just—

Courtney: [00:16:23] Yeah, one of my favorite books is *In Defense of Classical Education* by Livingstone. It's like a century old and you can find it on Archive.org. But, they run excerpts from it every now and then. You find a lot of the same arguments that we're having now, they were having then. But as a science teacher, one of the things that I notice is not only is the science light, and not only is it an emphasis on nature study—and I'm all for nature study. I feel terribly guilty that that's not one of the things I've emphasized in our home education. But I also want to point out that most of it is either at its best neutral or young earth creationism. And so that's another thing you want to be on the look-out for, there, if you're going to think about using their products.

AJ: [00:17:07] Definitely.

Courtney: [00:17:08] So, just a thought. Let's switch gears. Somebody specifically, and you know what, I am terribly sorry, I don't remember exactly who it was, asked us to take a look at the Michael Clay Thompson, or MCT, Language Arts Curriculum. Jen, why don't you go first, because I think you tried it first, before any of us, probably.

Jen: [00:17:24] Yeah, because I think it was one of my older boys are they are, you know, in their mid-20s. I used just the MCT Vocabulary. It's an upper-level vocabulary book, I think there's three, called Word within the Word. And it really helped him score very high on a standardized test, so that was good. And I tried the MCT—they have a literature component, and it's kind of a mix and match. I guess I'll get into that when I talk about my problems with MCT, and it's that I find it very confusing. Anyway, there are levels of trilogies that are in the public domain that they have reprinted. The vocabulary words that you should know are highlighted and it's annotated, I think, by Michael Clay Thompson, possibly. Or someone on their staff.

[00:18:14] I would say it's great for maybe middle grade kids if you don't have time to break down all that analysis yourself, but it didn't work for my daughter.

Courtney: [00:18:24] Hold up, why wasn't it a good fit for her? What was the matter for her.

Jen: [00:18:27] She's a weirdo who wants color and illustrations and this is just a black and white paperback reprint.

Courtney: [00:18:35] She's the artist, though, right?

Jen: [00:18:38] Yes. I know.

AJ: [00:18:38] And honestly, that is one of the things I wanted to say about our experience with this. The aesthetics matter. Like, I know, just like your daughter, Jen, my daughter is now studying art and the way that the books looked mattered tremendously to her. That's just one of those things. It's a quirky thing about certain kinds of kids, aesthetics matter.

Jen: [00:18:55] I am not an artist in any way. And I can tell you that last night when I was trolling through their website, some of the art on the covers of their grammar books... it's not great. Like, they could really benefit from a graphic designer.

Courtney: [00:19:08] Oh my goodness, Jen. I was looking at it last night, too. They had a whole statement about how much they love their graphic design, that it was carefully designed just for this, so.

Jen: [00:19:19] Yeah, did you watch that video?

Courtney: [00:19:20] No, I didn't watch the video.

Jen: [00:19:23] They have a very long YouTube video, a little infomercial that I watched and unfortunately, it sort of worked. I'm not sold on the whole kit and caboodle, but it did remind me of that vocabulary program so I did order the current level of books for Declan. He'll be thrilled to listen to this podcast and hear that there is, indeed, a new workbook coming his way.

AJ: [00:19:43] Thanks mom!

Jen: [00:19:45] I know, he's going to be like, I hate this podcast. So here is a quote from the video and it's interspersed with a really cute spokesgirl, and she's modern, and then little clips of Michael Clay Thompson, it looks like, giving a seminar. He's in a classroom, there's a lot of adults in the chairs and there's a whiteboard. And he says, "Kids that have grammar have a foundation for academic success for life and for happiness."

AJ: [00:20:13] If happiness came packaged with direct objects my life would be so much better.

Jen: [00:20:18] I found out things I didn't know about him. It explains a lot about the program. So now I'm actually a little bit more fond of the fact that basically, he's a word nerd. He's so enthused not only about grammar, but about vocabulary, because apparently he went through, I don't know, they said like 200 classic novels and as he was reading, he

picked out words he thought were interesting. Then he created a giant spreadsheet to show how many classic novels that word appears in.

Courtney: [00:20:49] I love it. In modern linguistic analysis, I don't remember what it's called, but that's a thing.

AJ: [00:20:53] It is.

Jen: [00:20:54] So, although I really liked diagramming and he doesn't diagram. He has his own method and that was the first thing that turned me off of the grammar, even years back, was that I was not going to learn some new way of doing this when I already knew how to diagram from 8<sup>th</sup> grade English. I just wanted to teach my kids what I already knew how to do. As far as the vocabulary part, just give the warm fuzzies. But it's very hard to figure out what level you need if you do decide you're going to use them for language arts, you need a lot of books. I think each level comes to around \$200. There's no scheduling, really, and there's not a lot of direction. They have ages written, not skill levels.

[00:21:35] Not every 11 year old is going to be level three or whatever. I feel like it's very hard to implement. If you are a new homeschooler, I would not suggest you buy it only because if you don't choose correctly, you wasted a lot of money and then you have this huge stack of books that either are too easy or too hard.

Courtney: [00:21:53] Which leads right on up to my problems with this.

AJ: [00:21:55] Yep.

Courtney: [00:21:55] First, as far as I know, and I could be wrong. I'm often wrong. As far as I know, Michael Clay Thompson came up with this unique grammar teaching system all out of his own mind. And I actually asked a sales rep about that at a conference, and that was the impression that I received back. I mean, I could have misinterpreted, but that's the vibe that I got there.

[00:22:16] I'm kind of suspicious of any full-bore curriculum that one person came up with, because I think that experts should and will have their work double-checked by other people. Ideally, you're going to co-write it with a team. For example, when I wrote that book on online teaching this summer, I sent entire chapters hither and yon asking people to double-check my work. And I actually worked with someone who reviewed each chapter as it was written. So I'm also, well, a little skeptical. But, Gwen is gifted in language arts. And it's not just proud

mama talking, I had her tested. I heard that MCT is great for gifted students so I thought I would give it a try.

[00:22:51] Keep in mind, this was a few years back. I don't have unlimited fundage, you know. I wanted to get this right, so I emailed Royal Fireworks Press. I listed all the curricula she completed in the last year, and I asked them what package I should buy. I was willing, at this point, to lay out the cash for the whole set. Just give me the box and I will take it, and we will go. Now, keep in mind, she was reading at the high school level at this point. They email me back, recommended level two, ages 9-11, or level three, ages 10-12. In other words, despite the fact that she was already advanced, they didn't actually recommend any acceleration, which is a problem.

[00:23:29] I also didn't like that they didn't have a daily or weekly schedule with a checklist of tasks ready for you. Or if they did, I never found it, and I'd like to think I'm pretty good at looking for that stuff. All I found was this pretty pastel monthly chart, and quite frankly, I needed more than that. In fact their 2020 catalogue says, and I quote, "There are no week by week plans."

[00:23:51] Keep in mind, at this point, I had a three year old with significant health-care needs due to a complex chronic health condition, and I was working, and the only sitters I could get were very part-time babysitters from the local university. And I needed something all laid out, and I'm willing to pay for it. But it apparently didn't exist here.

[00:24:10] That discussion about acceleration is relevant because the first book in the list for level 2 is Grammar Town and pages 8-63 are devoted to the parts of speech. Keep in mind that at this point, she had already completed an entire year of 5<sup>th</sup> grade grammar, complete with sentence diagramming and I had told them this. She had been studying nouns and verbs for three years at this point, beginning with first language lessons when she was six.

[00:24:37] She was already familiar with adjectives, and pronouns and compound and complex sentences and so on. I mean, everybody says this is great, it must be great, right? I'm like, we're going to do this. I said, well, you know, I don't read much poetry with her as a rule, maybe we'll try the poetry book. And she was deeply unamused. She found the whole thing patronizing. And that's the thing about having a gifted kid. You know, they're always one step ahead of you. I didn't know, but she already knew about rhyme schemes and alliteration, and assonance and so on.

[00:25:11] And at this point, she'd been reading the original Shakespeare. She was offended at the childish layout of the books. The font is rather large. She was bored with the content, and so on. And this is exactly what I tried to avoid when I emailed them with her list of completed curricula, and I felt like I was ignored. Fortunately, I didn't lay out a whole bunch of cash, I had the curricula given to me by a kind homeschool mom whose children had outgrown it, and I bought the rest of what I thought I would need used. So I just put it up and I continued on with the general style of recommendations in the Well Trained Mind, which had produced such excellent results already.

[00:25:44] That is my experience. I wanted to like it. Tried it. Couldn't make it work.

AJ:

[00:25:49] And in my experience with the levels was similar. We were advised to use level 2, so that Town level, with Ruby when she was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and she was also a very strong reader, like Gwen, at the high school level at that age. She'd been in a classical cottage school in second grade and a private classical academy in third grade, and we'd been doing Latin together since she was maybe five. So we went through Grammar Town, and I think Paragraph Town, which the publisher recommends for 5<sup>th</sup> grade. But Ruby had learned everything in those books years earlier.

[00:26:18] And I also wondered a lot about the—how many 5<sup>th</sup> graders were going to get excited about talking ducks. You know, it just was... the presentation really did seem pretty childish for kids that age. Ruby went with it because she kind of likes the cutesy stuff, but I could imagine a lot of kids being really turned off by that. I could see using those books with a child who is gifted in language arts, but you'd end up having to do the same thing that you do with most programs, which is you zoom them through multiple levels in a year, which is expensive, or you end up skipping to a higher level to challenge the child.

[00:26:47] So that doesn't line up with the way they present themselves as a gifted education resource. I want to be fair to them. Part of the challenge of working with gifted kids is that they're so individual. Many of them display asynchronous development, meaning that they're at very different levels in different subjects for their age. And that's why it's so hard to put together a curriculum for them. It's also one of the reasons those of us with gifted kids or 2E kids end up homeschooling, because there's nothing in a school environment that will meet their needs.

[00:27:14] But I also expect a curriculum company that is serving that community to be aware enough of what's taught in their competitor's

products that they can accurately place a child if you give them the curricula that the child has already successfully completed.

[00:27:26] All that said, I think the products themselves, they're nicely done. They're quirky. The art is... it varies, but some of it was a heck of a lot better than the clip art I was seeing in a lot of stuff at that time. That was important for my child, the fact that there were illustrations in the book to start with, that was important. She liked that the author threw in little asides about Greek words, for example. Many actual Greek letters. That's what she grew up with. "It comes from the Greek," right? So, I just would have used them with her at a much earlier age. Like, those Town books would have worked for her when she was in maybe the K-2 range, but definitely not 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>.

Courtney:

[00:27:59] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your favorite podcast by leaving us a review. Then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for another curriculum.