

WHY I CHOSE A CLASSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

When I first started researching curricula to homeschool my son, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of available materials, teaching approaches, and subjects to be addressed. As I researched and sorted through catalogs and websites, I felt drawn to many of the components of a highly traditional education—classical literature, ancient history, Latin, grammar, as well as music and art. I felt that with such traditional pillars of learning as a foundation, my son would be able to learn anything, achieve anything.

As I started to build my curriculum, I had many questions: When should I introduce Latin? And where should I start with history—with American history, as so many curricula suggested? We were already reading children's versions of many classics of ancient literature, like Homer's *Odyssey*—but what was the best way to weave literature with history?

Then another homeschooling mom turned me on to *The Well-Trained Mind* by Jessie Wise and her daughter, Susan Wise Bauer. Jessie Wise was a bit of a renegade, pulling her three children out of school in the '70s and homeschooling them. She realized that they were already achieving above their grade level and were bored in school. *The Well-Trained Mind* is a compilation of hard-earned wisdom, the fruit of all the years Jessie homeschooled—but it's not just another personal account of homeschooling.

The *Well-Trained Mind* presents all the components of a classical education curriculum. The authors define classical education as follows: "Classical education has to do with setting up solid foundations, with learning how to learn, with mental discipline, and intellectual curiosity, and a willingness to grapple with the lessons of the past." At its core, the book has three principles:

1. LINKING LEARNING OBJECTIVES TO DEVELOPMENTAL ABILITY

The authors detail three discrete stages of learning, which the authors call the trivium:

—"Grammar": first through fourth grade--lays a foundation of knowledge

—"Logic": fifth through eighth grade--teaches the student to think through the validity of arguments, to weigh the value of evidence;

—"Rhetoric": ninth through twelfth grade--the student uses the knowledge and the skill of logical argument to write and speak about all the subjects in the curriculum.

For each stage they make concrete recommendations for how best to stimulate the child's mind, teaching to the child's natural strengths. In the grammar stage, a child's brain has an ability to memorize information unequaled in all the subsequent years. (To demonstrate this natural ability, just think of how the typical seven-year-old can recite sections of dialogue from a movie he has seen only once, or the name and specific details of every Pokemon character.) Consequently, during the grammar stage, many of learning activities involve memorization: math facts, poetry, music, historical dates, grammar rules.

The authors also recommend introducing Latin in third grade instead of ninth. The third grade Latin course the authors recommend, though, consists almost entirely of vocabulary memorization and word study, activities a mind in the grammar stage is capable of performing. Moreover, there are several important reasons to study the 'dead language,' Latin:

-it trains the mind to think in an orderly fashion;

-it improves English skills;

-it prepares the child to study other foreign languages;

-it exposes the child to another culture, far different from our own.

2. HISTORY AS THE SPINE

Use history as the organizing principle for weaving together all the other subjects. The book suggests breaking down all of history into four blocks, each covered in a year's time:

- Ancients (5000 BC-AD 400): studied in first, fifth, and ninth grades;
- Medieval-Early Renaissance (400-1600): studied in second, sixth, and tenth grades;
- Late Renaissance-Early Modern (1600-1850): studied in third, seventh, and eleventh grades;
- Modern (1850-Present): studied in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades.

As you are immersing your child in each period, you choose literature that ties to the time—our son, for instance, read the Gilgamesh epic when we were studying ancient Mesopotamia—and you study the geography related to the history. As a result, the child learns the history of the world in a logical linear fashion (no skipping around), while at the same time building a mental map of the globe. In the course of twelve years, the child encounters each time period and the major literature of the time three distinct times, each time going into more depth.

3. STRONG WRITING & LANGUAGE ARTS

The authors de-mystify the teaching of reading and writing, and they recommend a number of methods some might think of as old-fashioned—memorization, for instance, of poetry and excerpts from great works; copying well-written sentences or selections of literature; dictation. A strong foundation in language arts is essential for success in the later logic and rhetoric stages.

The parents I have met who are following the classical approach generally conclude that it is a lot of work. It takes a lot of planning. It takes many trips to the library. (One mom with three kids actually goes to three different libraries each month in order to keep her three kids outfitted with pertinent reading material.) But we all have concluded that it's worth the effort. As one mom told me, "The reason I use a 'classic' curriculum is that I believe that the humanities are the best way for my children to develop the foundations of knowledge, the insight and the reasoning that will enable them, in the future, to exercise critical and ethical judgment in all areas of their lives, whether it be as concerned citizens or cutting-edge scientists."

Diane Speed lives in Bethel, CT with her husband, Roy, six-year-old son, Tristan, and 22-month-old daughter, Holden. In January 2002, she organized a classical education support group that meets twice each month: one evening for adults, and one afternoon for kids. For more information on the group, please contact Diane at dspeed@salientcomm.com.