

What is Classical Education?

part of our Parent Education Literature Series

by Lisa Lewis



Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire. William B. Yeats

Classical Education has had resurgence in popularity in recent years. Many people seeking understanding of what it is are frustrated as there is not one definitive explanation of what classical education really is. In actuality, there are several schools of thought regarding what elements make up classical education. At SLO Classical Academy we have looked to several resources and blended their points of view to arrive at what we define classical education to be. There are quite a few good informative books to read that give further explanation of the breadth of classical education, but we will address the highlights of our definition in this article.

One commonly agreed upon element of classical education is that a student's learning progresses through three stages labeled as the Trivium: grammar, logic/dialectic, and rhetoric. These stages are loosely divided by ages: grammar 5-9; logic 10-13; rhetoric 13-17. At the Classical Academy we provide education geared toward the grammar and logic stages. During these age groups children developmentally are ready for certain types of learning processes. In the grammar stage a student is ready for the basic knowledge of many different subjects. They love to memorize facts, poems, stories, and love to tell them back to anyone and everyone who will listen! In the

logic stage a student wants to interact with what they have previously learned by questioning and testing information. The logic stage is full of "why is this done this way?" kinds of questions. The writing and discussions that ensue can be very rich and challenging!

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Classical education also has the common element of the study of great books. Again, definitions of what constitutes a great book vary but there are commonly agreed upon aspects that the Classical Academy ascribes to as well (See "Choosing Good Literature for our Children" in this series). One of these aspects is that characters need to be those with whom the reader can find believable and interesting. For example a fairly modern classic is the Laura Ingalls Wilder series of "Little House" books. These stories are based on her life and portray history in a way that boys and girls find fascinating. One of several resources on classical education we refer to is Charlotte Mason. She is the author of a number of books which explain what a thorough

education entails. Within those books she explains several components we employ at the Classical Academy. One very important component is that of a living book. She describes a living book to be one of well-written prose. In her own words: "There is never a time when they (children) are unequal to worthy thoughts, well put; inspiring tales, well told. Let Blake's 'Songs of Innocence' represent their standard in poetry DeFoe and Stevenson, in prose; and we shall train a race of readers who will demand literature--that is, the fit and beautiful expression of inspiring ideas and pictures of life." Living books are just that--inspiring tales that cause the reader to play act the character's experiences or contemplate how they would have acted in similar circumstances and any number of additional ways of interacting with the story or information. Too often what is considered children's literature of today merely entertains for a moment rather than affecting for a lifetime.

Another common element of classical education is the curriculum choice and content. Curriculum choices are integrated through the timeline of history so that the development of the child's knowledge flows

in chronologic order giving the child a sensible progression of information. History, then, becomes a backbone for a classical education, and other subject matter is tied to the time period being studied. For instance, literature titles are chosen to coordinate with the historic period of study.

Additionally, the emphasis on sound character development and the ability to think are paramount in classical education. It matters greatly who children grow into at the end of their formal education; are they able to think for themselves or simply complete tasks? Can they not only discuss character or is this character being developed within them? Are the things they are studying affecting who they are or only looked upon as the means to an end? These are distinguishing factors in classical education.

Finally, one of the most important elements commonly ascribed to classical education is the development of excellent communication skills. As a young student memorization and recitation are key parts of language development. Through the years, the ability to recite in front of groups, compose one's own writing, and participate in debate on issues are all components of excellent communication skills. The study of formal logic, Latin as a sec-

ond language, and the development of the skills of debate are all elements that are commonly equated with excellent communication skills found in classical education.

Thus, when children complete a formal classical education experience, they will have the information available to think logically about a subject and then express their thoughts, beliefs and feelings about that subject in an excellent, effective manner. As you can imagine, this prepares children uniquely for the future as leaders in many capacities.

In summary, then, classical education is a historically based approach to education built on the developmental stages of a child which involves gathering information, thinking logically about that information and then learning to express oneself in written and oral forms. Great literature, history and the development of character are all key components to classical education, with goals of helping children love to learn and learn to think.

It behooves us as educators to take the long view of our children's education and picture what we desire for them to be able to know and accomplish when their formal education is complete. Once we have constructed the picture we are wise to work backward in time identifying the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve these goals for their

education. Too often we lose sight of the impact of day-to-day neglect of good, wise choices for our children. The choice to educate our children in a classical manner is an inclusive choice that involves our family's lifestyle. One of the goals of a classical education at SLO Classical Academy is the development of a love of learning that is lifelong. Through the integration of curriculum, emphasis on timeline learning and lots of hands on opportunities the whole family has the love of learning stimulated. The key quote of the Classical Academy comes from poet William Butler Yeats and encapsulates all the elements of classical education. "Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

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Lisa Lewis is one of the founders of SLO Classical Academy and brings 24 years of teaching experience in public, private and home schooling settings. She is widely respected as a teacher and is committed to her own lifelong learning. Lisa has spent hours becoming versed in classical education and has used classical methods in her teaching.

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