

Classical Education:

Does it Belong in our Schools?

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Abstract

Drawing on the rich history of Western Civilization, classical education prepares students with a wide base of knowledge and then arms them with skills of reasoning and elocution. Postmodern education views classical learning as outdated and superfluous. Through an analysis of perceived drawbacks and values, the true place for classical education is determined.

Agree or disagree: “the study of ancient Greek and Latin long ago vanished from most American classrooms, and with it has gone a special understanding of the values and virtues prized by Western civilization” (Howe, p. 1)? Are our present, progressive or postmodern classrooms barren of our western heritage? If so, is this lack of classical recognition worthy of changing? Classical education, with its roots in time proven skills, is an option to successfully educate the next generation of responsible citizens.

First, it is appropriate to lay out a clear picture of classical education. From a historical point of view classical education is, “the Seven Liberal Arts, as further developed in the Middle Ages, consisted of two parts: the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the quadrivium of mathematics, music, astronomy, and geometry” (Veith, p. 11). Several of these words are not spoken or thought of in our elementary schools today. Veith suggests the following implementation of the trivium, which assumes educational development. More clearly:

The trivium is a paradigm for the mastery of language. But it applies to far more than language. Every subject has its grammar, logic, and rhetoric. To be educated in any discipline, you must 1) know its basic facts (grammar); 2) be able to reason clearly about it (logic); and 3) communicate its ideas and apply it effectively (rhetoric) (Veith, p. 12).

All of these steps lead to beauty and virtue in the world. The quadrivium shows the four different kinds of learning. This is the basic way to understand the components of classical education.

In practice, a classical school can assume different structures. Most commonly, grades one through four are named the grammar stage and in these years facts are memorized. Classicists consider children at this age to be sponges. This stage lays the foundation of learning. After mastery, children move to the logic phase, typically grades five through eight. Students are

encouraged to notice the cause and effect in the world and figure out why. As abstract thinking matures the students are able to put a logical framework together. (Wise, J. & Bauer, S., p.43-44). Finally, in the rhetoric stage of the high school years the classical student “applies the rules of logic learned in middle school to the foundational information learned in the early grades and expresses her conclusions in clear, forceful, elegant language” (Wise, J. & Bauer, S., p. 44). Developing expression allows students to convey their thoughts and knowledge in an effective manner. This is the skeleton of classical learning.

Three main arguments exist in opposition to classical education: its perceived confining nature, its separation of knowledge from its utility, and its perceived support of rationalism. Compared to contemporary progressive education where socialization and individual strengths are considered at every stage the rigor of classical education is regarded as unnecessary and confining. Gene Veith expounds that, “some critics believe classical education is authoritarian and stifling to creativity. They imagine a teacher rapping the knuckles of the student who has not formed his letters correctly or forcing children to memorize trivial facts and repeat boring drills” (p. 117). This stereotypical view that classical education is a ‘drill kill’ environment is widely accepted. This type of learning has no place in the postmodern technological world where all information is at our fingertips. Mastery of a subject or skill should not be required.

Next, critics disagree with grammar students memorizing facts before they use them in daily lessons. Young children cannot remember or use information that they do not understand. VanDamme expands,

It is clearly a mistake to treat all knowledge as first-level knowledge or to teach floating abstractions under the heading of “facts.” But it is equally a mistake to divide the learning process into the artificial stages of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Beyond the

immediate, perceptual level of knowledge, the acquisition of *all* knowledge at *every* stage requires grammar, logic, and rhetoric (webpage).

This critic supports the movement of individuals constructing their own meaning as learning takes place. In this way the learner is in charge of their knowledge.

Thirdly, progressive educators critique classical education's perceived tendency towards and support of rationalism. While rationalism may seem like an ideal system, almost utopian like, for arriving at truth, because of internal philosophical issues, current scientific research- especially related to mind-body interaction-, and the resultant modernistic morass [rationalism is to Enlightenment as fascism is to Modernism], rationalism is not a popular philosophical system these days. It is certainly not one that parents, educators and the government want to inculcate in young, impressionable minds. Rationalism, it is suggested, is supported by classical education because of its non-holistic educational approach-its emphasis on cognitive capabilities over against emotional, moral and societal interaction. Some have even noticed that, due in part to the strong intellectual history of Christianity, rationalism tends to support this modern punching bag. "The rationalism that unites the various forms of secular classical education leaves them ill-equipped to provide a proper alternative to "progressive" education. Instead, it paves the way for an insidious educational movement that explicitly and passionately defends rationalism in education: Christian classical education" (VanDamme). So, for supporters of progressive, especially secular education, classical education is a dreadful solution. It will return the citizenry to the European thinking of the late 19th and early 20th century, it will not coexist with contemporary scientific research, it will further the radicalization of the religious population, and it is simply an insufficient philosophical system

In defense, or even encouragement of a classical education, proponents point out that it sets the stage for more than just rationalistic thought. “Classical education nourishes wonder; it provokes the curiosity and inquisitiveness that leads to scientific discovery; and it inclines the mind to ultimate questions of religious faith” (Veith, p. 117). By committing knowledge to memory, being able to see the parts of an argument, and finally express oneself in a clear way- classical students are able to participate in thoughtful discussions. The student will naturally examine the world around him leading to a full and meaningful life as an independent citizen. Classical schools show higher test scores on standardized tests in the few studies that have been completed. One research study comparing the test results of classical and non-classical Lutheran schools had surprising results. “The data showed a steady increase in test scores from kindergarten through grade eight for the classical Lutheran schools and a steady decline in scores for the non-classical Lutheran school” (Splittgerber, A., p. 49). These results came from a quantitative study which compared the results of reading and math scores between schools of similar size. This study is the beginning of research done comparing the effectiveness of the classical model in our Lutheran schools. The researcher reasoned the reading scores showed an increase in the classical model schools because they began teaching Latin in the third grade. Learning Latin has been shown to increase language scores across the board. Classical learning embodies a desire to know language. Learning Latin is in contrast to the ideas of John Dewey, classical education focuses on reading literature as the end result rather than focusing on the act of learning to read itself. (Veith, p. 2) The researcher had no explanation for the mathematics scores increase. From this study we should consider the possible benefits to restructuring our schools and adopting some of the practices of the classical schools. Test scores alone should not make our decision but it is a factor.

Classical education aims at “not socialization or vocational training, but initiation into a cultural heritage, induction into the ongoing conversation of Western Civilization” (Leithart, p. 5). In the high stakes test culture of today’s schools it is hard not to yearn for education for the sake of knowledge and beauty rather than a number. Students should not be denied their roots for the sake of STEM education. Classical education equips children to enter the world ready to participate with a full breadth of great ideas and knowledge behind them.

In conclusion, built on a foundation of time tested knowledge and given the skills of logic and speech, classical students enter the modern world as responsible citizens. Individuals with a vast education with the great history of western civilization behind them. As a possible solution, Lutheran schools could consider expanding their reading lists and including real literature rather than leaning on basal readers and teaching Latin again. Another option which I think some schools already take advantage of is Saxon math which does encourage memorizing math tables and chanting math facts. Students in the upper grades should have opportunities to debate apologetics to defend their faith and become familiar with common logical fallacies. Even though some schools have transitioned completely to a classical model it does not seem necessary to take advantage of the benefits of classical education. Finally, we have a rich history that should be shared with future generations.

References

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