

Review Article

Introducing K-12 Classical Education: Modern Take on Ancient Curriculum

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Abstract: There are hundreds of public and private K-12 classical schools operating across the United States, but how these schools interpret the term “classical” is unclear. Researchers in the field of education must begin to investigate this unique approach to schooling for the sake of the children who attend these schools and to discover if, perhaps, something of use might be learned from them to improve outcomes for all children. The purpose of this literature review is to bring K-12 classical education to the attention of scholars and researchers in the hope that an introduction might encourage future study on the topic. The project was designed and implemented according to Cooper’s (1988) literature review classification. It was found that published classical educators and proponent organizations recommend several curricular elements in common, including a focus on the Western canon and use of the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric to understand child development and to determine content and teaching methods across disciplines. New research is needed to determine to what extent the recommendations in the literature are enacted in K-12 classical schools serving real communities.

Keywords: Classical education, K-12 Classical education, Liberal arts, Trivium, Latin, Western civilization, Great Books, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

In higher education, classics majors study the history, languages, literature, and culture of the Ancient Greeks and Romans; professors of classical studies teach on these topics and present them at classical conferences. Classical associations and institutions, such as the Classical Association of the Middle West and South (CAMWS), connect classical scholars in higher education and K-12 educators teaching Latin, Greek, or classical humanities. The meaning of “classical” in these contexts is clear and refers to the study of the Greeks and Romans. That study is what binds the aforementioned majors, professors, associations, scholars, and educators. In the United States, there are public and private K-12 schools that self-identify as classical and claim to provide a classical education, yet they stand apart from the rest of the classical community. We would be wrong to assume that they focus on Greek and Roman culture or history. Indeed, just what these K-12 institutions mean when they use the term “classical” is not currently clear, due to a lack of empirical and foundational research on their approach. What we can say is that K-12 classical education appears to be unique in terms of its engagement with the Western intellectual tradition and its peculiar interpretation of the ancient *trivium*, the disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

There are over 500 K-12 public and private classical schools operating in the United States (Richardi, 2022). Many thousands of children and young adults are currently enrolled, and each of those youths constitutes a separate and equally compelling reason to investigate K-12 classical education. What is happening in these schools? What pedagogies are practiced? What philosophies drive those methods? Several K-12 classical schools refer to the classical approach as “innovative” (Richardi, 2022), which is agreed upon by the author. K-12 classical proponents understand and utilize ancient educational prescriptions in ways that are indeed both creative and original. At a time when public education advocates and researchers are looking for ways to improve academic outcomes for an increasingly diverse student population, it is important for us to learn how these schools operate, educate, and socialize their young charges. Perhaps something of use may be discovered: methods to apply or avoid in K-12 classrooms. The purpose of this review is to encourage future study by bringing K-12 classical schooling to the attention of scholars and researchers in the field of education and to do so by describing the curricular elements most widely discussed in the available literature on the approach.

2. Methods

A systematic review of the limited body of literature treating K-12 classical education was framed by Cooper's (1988) work on literature review classification. Cooper proposed four points of distinction between literature reviews: perspective, coverage, organization, and audience. The perspective taken is that of an outside observer and synthesizer of information. Coverage included popular books on classical education aimed at parents of school-age children, unpublished essays written by K-12 classical proponents, and informational materials posted or printed by K-12 classical institutions (bodies with funding that are involved in either founding or supporting K-12 classical public, charter, or private schools). Several unpublished dissertations relating to K-12 classical education were consulted, as well. The review is organized conceptually (Cooper, 1988) and has been written for an audience of educational researchers with little to no knowledge of modern classical schooling. Sources for this literature review were sought and obtained from the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest for dissertations, Google searches for books containing the title key term "classical education," and the websites of prominent K-12 classical organizations.

3. History of K-12 Classical Education

As implied by its name, classical education has roots in Ancient Greece and Rome. The philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle pondered the questions that have since become embedded in K-12 classical disputations, such as the nature of virtue and the connection between knowledge, happiness, and good citizenship (Hart, 2006). The Christian Church preserved classical learning between the fall of the Roman Empire and the early Middle Ages before it passed to the great medieval universities (Boyd, 1932). Classical learning was rediscovered during the Renaissance when thinkers, artists, architects, authors, and scientists reacquainted themselves with ancient texts (Boyd, 1932) and humanists committed themselves to an education based on classical literature (Kimball, 1995). During the Enlightenment, a new interpretation of the classical liberal arts took shape which emphasized freedom, rationality, and skepticism (Kimball, 1995).

Classical learning came to colonial America via Latin grammar schools transplanted from England, and for two centuries American college entrance requirements remained solidly classical (Gummere, 1960). With a demographic and technological change in the 19th century, however, came necessary changes in schooling and curriculum (Bagley, 1936; Kliebard, 2004). The Committee of Ten, appointed by the National Education Association to examine college entrance requirements, published a list of curricular recommendations in 1893 which departed from the traditional classical curriculum (Kliebard, 2004, p. 16). Social changes called for curriculum changes to represent a "full scope of life activities" and to prepare American students for the roles they were expected to play as adults (Kliebard, 2004, p. 89). The traditional classical curriculum could not satisfy those requirements.

In the 20th century, classical learning underwent something of a transformation. In the United States in the 1980s, traditional classical education began to branch off and become *K-12 classical education*. Before expanding and diversifying, this revolutionary interpretation of classical learning centered upon the educational philosophies and activities of three figures: Dorothy Sayers, Douglas Wilson, and Mortimer Adler.

Dorothy Sayers might be called the spiritual founder of the K-12 classical education movement; some have referred to her as its patron saint (Farris and Woodruff, 2011). Sayers was a British mystery novelist and erstwhile classicist who flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. Having graduated from Oxford University in 1915, in 1947 she delivered an address to Oxford students in which she eviscerated contemporary British education. In her eyes, it failed to provide graduates with adequate communication skills and fell far short of preparation for lifelong learning (Sayers, 1947). Sayers suggested a "progressive retrogression" (p. 10) to the trivium – the disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric – to provide students with the tools of learning needed throughout one's life. Crucially, Sayers also viewed the arts of the trivium as stages of childhood development, an interpretation which she unapologetically derived from recollections of her own childhood (p. 10).

Sayers's fiery speech caught the attention of American William F. Buckley Jr., founder, and editor of the conservative magazine *National Review*. Buckley published her speech, at that time an essay entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning," three times over two decades, in 1959, 1960, and 1979. Douglas Wilson, an evangelical pastor in Moscow, Idaho, happened upon the essay in a January 1979 issue of the *Review* and decided to build a Christian school modeled after Sayers's vision for a trivium-based education when it came time to formally educate his first child (Hart, 2006; Leithart, 2008; Wilson, 2003). The Logos School opened its doors in 1981. Ten years later, Wilson penned a book to share his unique model for a "distinctively Christian education" as it was realized at Logos (Wilson, 1991). The title of the work, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, is an homage to Dorothy Sayers. Wilson devotes an entire chapter to her understanding of the trivium and reproduces her 1947 address in its entirety. Says Wilson: "[Sayers's] thoughts on education have been put into practice, and they work" (1991, p. 92, Wilson's emphasis). Classical Christian education took off after Wilson's book, and Wilson himself is credited as the founder of classical Christian education in the U.S. and the first to recover and reify Dorothy Sayers's vision of the trivium in a K-12 educational context (Barnes, 2014; Clark and Jain, 2019; Hart, 2006; Veith and Kern, 2015). Over time, secular interpretations based on Sayer's and Wilson's ideas seeded new secular

charter schools: for example, Great Hearts. Daniel Scoggin, Great Hearts CEO, and founder, quotes Sayers extensively and parrots her concerns about modern schooling in an issue of *Great Hearts* magazine (Scoggin, 2008).

Mortimer Adler made a significant impact on the reformation and new development of classical education in the U.S. His effective promotion of the “Great Books” of the Western canon in the mid-20th century deeply influenced the leaders of the reformed classical education movement (Barnes, 2014; Woods, 2019). Most published classical educators and K-12 classical organizations now emphasize the timeless significance of the great books and credit Adler by name for this contribution to the classical tradition (Hart, 2006; Littlejohn and Evans, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015). It is notable that Adler himself differentiated his preferred teaching method, the Paideia Program, from any classical approach in his second book on Paideia teaching, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (1983).

Despite shared ties to these influential scholars and educators, K-12 classical education is by no means monolithic. There is some variation in the perspectives of individual authors and K-12 classical organizations: for example, on the purpose of classical learning. Some frame that purpose in terms of citizenship and public good (Hillsdale College, n.d.-a; ResponsiveEd, 2022), others in terms of personal intellectual and moral enlightenment (Bauer, 2016; Great Hearts America, n.d.-b), and still others as a religious purpose (Association of Classical Christian Schools, 2022; Wilson, 1991, 2006). A recent unpublished dissertation also suggests variation in how individual K-12 classical schools interpret classical learning (Richard, 2022).

Nonetheless, there are shared understandings and curricular recommendations to be found in the literature on K-12 classical education. In the following sections, I present the curricular elements which appear to constitute a sine qua non for K-12 classical learning, given the frequency of their appearance in published literature and the passion with which they are presented and defended by K-12 classical learning proponents today.

4. Integral Curricular Elements

4.1 Liberal Arts

The liberal arts are grammar, logic, rhetoric (constituting the trivium), arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy (the *quadrivium*). Together, the seven disciplines of the trivium and quadrivium constitute the *artes liberales*, linked conceptually since at least the late Roman period by pagan author Martianus Capella (fl. c. 415 A.D.), who allegorized their union as a marriage between Philology and the god Mercury (Stahl, 1971). For classical educators, these seven disciplines cohere to form a “realm of unified knowledge and a marriage of the humanities and the sciences” (Veith and Kern, 2015, p. 17). Published classical educators express a profound devotion to the study of the liberal arts as a character-building exercise and the best preparation for lifelong learning (Hart, 2006; Joseph and McGlenn, 2002; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015). As trivium expert Sister Miriam Joseph explained, craftsmen and fine artists create products for which they are paid whereas those working within the liberal arts take action on and within themselves, and are themselves profoundly changed and perfected by the experience (Joseph and McGlenn, 2002). For self-identified classical educators, mastery of the liberal arts is superior and preferable to work in other fields.

Relatedly, classical educators have described the liberal arts as skills that confer freedom upon those who study them (Joseph and McGlenn, 2002; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015). With dramatic flair, Caldecott (2012) refers to the liberal arts as a “golden thread” stretching back to the ancient Greeks, weaving through the early Christian and Islamic worlds, connecting all aspects of Western civilization (p. 9). Another purpose of the liberal arts as described in the literature is to discover truth through the use of reason, accompanied by a belief that knowledge ought to be sought for its own sake rather than for material gain (Simmons, 2012, p. 50).

The cultivation of morality and virtue through engagement with the liberal arts appears to be a major concern of classical educators. Many discuss the relationship between classical learning and moral development (Bortins, 2010; Perrin, 2004; Simmons, 2012; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). K-12 classical associations like the Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS), Responsive Education Solutions (ResponsiveEd), and Hillsdale College, place great emphasis on the cultivation of virtue as a goal of their classical curricula (Association of Classical Christian Schools, 2022; Hillsdale College, n.d.-a; ResponsiveEd, 2022). The flagship publication for Great Hearts’ Institute for Classical Education is called *VIRTUE*, and Great Hearts America claims that its classical liberal arts curriculum cultivates “hearts and minds” and prepares students to become “great-hearted” leaders (Great Hearts America, n.d.-a). On the websites for Hillsdale and ResponsiveEd, civic virtue stands out in importance.

4.2 Western Intellectual Tradition

Since the liberal arts has a pedigree grounded firmly in Western civilization (Kimball, 1995), it follows that a student of the liberal arts in the classical tradition should be well-read in the Western literary canon. Published classical educators and organizations advocate for a curricular emphasis on the “Great Books” of the Western canon, popularized by Mortimer Adler (Bauer,

2016; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). Charles Van Doren described great books as those which “never have to be written again” (quoted in Perrin, 2004, p. 28, n. 9); i.e., books treating themes perceived as eternally relevant to the human condition.

Classical educators value the Western tradition as a source of knowledge. Veith and Kern (2015) contend that great books, specifically, make the best fodder for what they call a “Western habit of perpetual self-examination” (p. 16). Pages on the websites of Hillsdale College, Great Hearts, and the ACCS mention an emphasis on great works. Perrin (2004), the administrator of a classical school, provides a list of books assigned to elementary-age students at his institution, which includes *Aesop’s Fables*, *The Boxcar Children*, *Little Women*, *Johnny Tremain*, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and *The Hobbit* (p. 29). Most published proponents of K-12 classical education view the transmission and preservation of Western culture through the Western literary canon as a major concern of education, and even its ultimate goal (Bauer, 2016; Bortins, 2010; Hart, 2006; Kopff, 2014; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991).

There is a belief among classical educators that by engaging with the great books of the Western world we enter into a “Great Conversation” (Hutchins, 1952, p. 4) consisting of timeless influential ideas (Bauer, 2016). For classical learning proponents, that conversation is the “beating heart” of Western civilization (Veith and Kern, 2015, p. 18). Participation in the conversation is believed to foster not only intellectual growth, but moral and ethical development (Simmons, 2012). A shared characteristic among classical educators is respect and reverence for the past. Richard Gamble, the editor of *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Educated Human Being* (2009), states that his anthology is meant to struggle against what he perceives as the modern tendency to ascribe value only to those ancient thinkers whose ideas bear most resemblance to our own. (p. xvii). Blind allegiance to the ideas of great authors is not a requirement of classical education, however. Hutchins and Adler admitted candidly that great books are not without defects. Adler himself stated that, while a reader might discover some basic truths within the pages of great works, he or she will also certainly find “many more errors” (Adler, 1988, p.xxvi). Wilson (1991) noted that while we are not required to agree with thinkers of the past, we ought to know in what ways we disagree (p. 83).

4.3 Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

A related and recurring theme in K-12 classical education literature is the quest for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. These concepts are frequently capitalized in writing to emphasize not only their significance but their alleged objectivity and capacity to be “investigated and known” (Littlejohn and Evans, 2019, p. 26). Teaching students to recognize truth, goodness, and beauty in all aspects of life is often expressed as an important goal, even the ultimate goal, of classical education (Adler, 1981; Gardner, 2012; Great Hearts America, n.d.-b; Hillsdale College, 2016; Littlejohn and Evans, 2006; Turley, 2014; Veith and Kern, 2015). The trinity of truth, goodness, and beauty originated in Ancient Greece, where thought was, for a time, anchored in the idea that there are absolutes in the universe, “ageless and immune from situation and interpretation,” a body of knowledge indisputable” (Hanson and Heath, 2001, p. 39).

Indeed, for classical educators, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are not only things knowable, but things *worthy of knowing*: foundational to Western culture and universal to human experience. Howard Gardner, of multiple intelligences fame, penned an entire book with the express goals of defining truth, goodness, and beauty and recommending ways we might teach them today (Gardner, 2012). In *Six Great Ideas*, Mortimer Adler analyzes the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty on a granular level as great ideas: i.e., those that we live by every day (Adler, 1981, p. 3). In Adler’s formulation, truth, goodness, and beauty are categorized as “ideas we judge by” (Adler, 1981). He argues that the expression of truth itself possesses a certain beauty and that the beauty of certain things having attained existential perfection is both a “special kind of goodness” and a “special kind of truth” (1981, p. 130). In the opinion of medieval scholar John of Salisbury, one who does not seek the truth must be a degenerate, because a virtuous disposition (i.e., certain goodness of character) demands a sound knowledge of the truth (Salisbury and McGarry, 2009, p. 84).

Classical educators appear discomfited by any notion that truth, goodness, and beauty are relative rather than objective ((Hicks, 1981; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). Veith and Kern (2015) worry that failure to recognize absolutes leave us no cultural foundations left to build upon: “not reason, revelation, tradition, or anything else” (p. 3). Perrin (2004) unhappily asserts that “philosophical relativism,” which he describes as a lack of universal truths and moral standards, is the unrivaled program of education today and reigns supreme in popular culture (p. 17). Wilson (1991) writes that the art of thinking is useless in a world without truth since the very purpose of a reasoning mind is to close in upon the truth (p. 61).

4.4 Latin

Among classical educators, avowals of the utility of Latin study abound (Kopff, 2014; Perrin, 2004; Sayers, 1947; Simmons, 2002; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). In their estimation, learning Latin is not only a healthy mental exercise, it is the key to

a better understanding of classical texts and some later texts in the Western canon (Clark and Jain, 2019; Kopff, 2014; Lowe, 2014; Perrin, 2004; Sayers, 1947). In a piece entitled “Why Latin is NOT Optional,” the founder of the classical Memoria Press Cheryl Lowe explains that Greek and Latin are too historically entangled with classical education for them to be left out of a K-12 classical school curriculum (2014, n.p.). For her, Latin study is the sine qua non of classical education. Clark and Jain (2013) share Lowe’s opinion on the necessity of classical language study in a K-12 classical curriculum. In her influential address, Dorothy Sayers (1947) asserted that Latin is the best foundation for education given its inflected nature, relationship to the Romance languages and modern technical vocabularies, and its place at the heart of an enormous body of rich literature (p. 23). She recommended that Latin education began in the early years of a child’s schooling. Wilson (1991) and Perrin (2004) advise that Latin instruction begins in the third grade. Recent research on the K-12 classical curriculum has found that classical schools are more likely than not to maintain a Latin program and proclaim Latin as a foundational discipline of great importance (Richard, 2022).

4.5 Trivium

Adherence in some manner to the trivium – grammar, logic, and rhetoric – appears to be a cornerstone of K-12 classical education (Bauer, 2016; Bortins, 2010; Calhoun, 1999; Hart, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991, 2003). The trivium is a triad of skills (Latin, *artes*) considered prerequisite during the medieval period for study at university in the arts of the quadrivium - music, astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry - which themselves prepared one for a focused education in natural philosophy (Kimball, 1995, p. 68). Dorothy Sayers (1947), whose influence on modern classical education has been immense and prescriptive, elevated the disciplines of the trivium, specifically, and famously referred to grammar, logic, and rhetoric as the lost tools of learning.

Grammar became a formal subject of study during the second century B.C. at the earliest and had its roots in the musical education of the Greeks: that is, the close examination of Greek poetry (Kimball, 1995, p. 25). Medieval grammar instruction consisted of linguistic study, specifically of Latin as the *lingua franca* of the age and the language of the Church. Even before, the 6th/7th-century A.D. archbishop and scholar Isidore of Seville (d. 636) believed the etymological investigation of words to be the archetype of all subsequently learned skills, and thus preferred it to all other forms of study (Kimball, 1995, p. 46). The student of logic learns the “art of thinking” (Joseph and McGlinn, 2002, p. 16). Rhetoric has roots in 5th-century Athens, where participation in direct democracy required an ability to speak well in public (Kimball, 1995, p. 24). Sister Miriam Joseph refers to rhetoric as the “master art of the trivium” (Joseph and McGlinn, 2002, p. 22).

Today, classical educators interpret the trivium in at least one of three distinct ways: (1) as a tool for learning other subject matter (Joseph, 2002; Sayers, 1947; Wilson, 1991); (2) as a metaphor for the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of attainment in any given discipline, such as history (Bauer, 2016; Bortins, 2010); (3) as stages of maturation or cognitive development corresponding roughly to elementary-, middle-, and high school-age students (Perrin, 2004; Sayers, 1947; Wilson, 2003). Dorothy Sayers’s influence here is as unmistakable as it is pervasive. All three understandings of the trivium can be traced to her 1947 Oxford address.

Sayers (1947) described the arts of the trivium not only as subjects in and of themselves, but also as “methods of dealing with subjects” or as tools to be applied to subjects (p. 7). For Sayers, re-adoption of the trivium as a curriculum for learning would solve what she considered a quintessential problem of modern education: it “concentrates on *teaching subjects*, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one’s conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along” (1947, p. 8, Sayers’s emphasis). She disapproved of what she perceived as a modern tendency to compartmentalize knowledge in silo-like subjects, inhibiting our ability to make connections across disciplines (p. 4). Sayers believed that full command of the tools of the trivium would allow us to synthesize knowledge across disciplines and in daily life. Classical educators and organizations appear to have inherited Sayer’s concern for knowledge integration (Association of Classical Christian Schools, 2022; CiRCE Institute, 2022; Clark and Jain, 2019; Hart, 2006; Littlejohn and Evans, 2006; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991).

Dorothy Sayers (1947) also understood the trivium as a model for child maturation or cognitive development. She described the child at each stage of development – grammar, logic, and rhetoric – and the appropriate content and pedagogies he or she should experience at each stage. These stages correspond to Sayers’s recollections of herself as a child. While she admitted that her views on child psychology were “neither orthodox nor enlightened,” she nonetheless relied upon these recollections to formulate her model since, as she said, “I am the child I know best and the only child I can pretend to know from inside” (p. 10).

Sayers’s grammar-stage learner, the “Poll-Parrot,” is a child of elementary-school age for whom learning by heart is pleasurable (1947, p. 10). The Poll-Parrot enjoys memorizing shapes, chanting rhymes, and delights in the accumulation of facts (p. 11). At this stage, observation and memory are the “most lively” faculties (p. 13), and students learn the foundational knowledge of multiple disciplines (i.e., their grammar). The grammar of history might consist of names, dates, and anecdotes; the grammar of

science, of naming specimens and properties; of mathematics, multiplication tables (p. 12-13). It is at this stage that children should begin to study Latin, which in Sayers's mind was the strongest foundation for learning in all disciplines (p. 11).

The "Pert," a student of logic, is a contrarian whose favorite pastimes include questioning, talking back, and catching out the unwary interlocutor (Sayers, 1947, p. 11). Sayers advised that a child is ready to enter the logic stage when he "shows himself disposed to...interminable argument" or, more kindly, when he begins to show a capacity for more abstract thinking (p. 14). Logic-stage learning in mathematics might involve algebraic equations; in history, discussions about the ethics of historic decisions (p. 15). Students might take a formal course in logic at this stage as knowledge and tasks in all disciplines ramp up in nuance and complexity (p. 14). Students begin to read essays and literary criticism and may participate in debates (p. 15). Sayers recommended the stuff of daily life to teach the skills of reasoned argument and constructive critique: for example, a controversial call during a recent sporting event (p. 16). Successful students of logic are able to "detect fallacy, slipshod reasoning, ambiguity, irrelevance, and redundancy, and...pounce upon them like rats" (p. 16).

Sayers's (1947) maturing teenager, the "Poet," enters the stage of rhetoric at an age that is "self-centered," "restless," and "rather specializes in being misunderstood" (p. 11). This is a time to synthesize knowledge previously learned (p. 11). Students of rhetoric long to express themselves and achieve greater independence (p. 11), and they are ready to specialize in subjects of particular interest (p. 17). Sayers describes the rhetoric stage of learning as a time for the appreciation of literature to lead over criticism, and for written self-expression to blossom (p. 17). She suggests that students ought to defend a thesis as a capstone graduation requirement (p. 18): a practical final activity to highlight one's skill at the closing of a stage of learning so focused on the composition and delivery of the articulate speech.

Sayers's interpretation of the trivium as a model for child development has wielded a great deal of influence on the K-12 classical movement (Clark and Jain, 2019). It has been taken up by K-12 classical proponents and is described on K-12 classical school websites (Richardi, 2022). Most classical educators recommend planning instruction based upon some aspect of Sayers's unique understanding of the trivium (Perrin, 2004; Spencer, 1996; Wilson, 1991, 2003). Bauer (2016) and Bortins (2010) use the term "grammar" to describe the foundational knowledge required for advancement in any subject. Many K-12 classical education proponents today write of the trivium as a necessary tool of learning that equip students to tackle any discipline (Bortins, 2010; Caldecott, 2012; Perrin, 2004; Spencer, 1996; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). There exists some dissent. Littlejohn and Evans (2006) question the practicality of concepts such as a "grammar of history" or a "grammar of mathematics" (p. 39). Hillsdale College and Great Hearts elevate the trivium as disciplines and as tools of learning but fall short of applying the trivium as a developmental model to inform instruction. One of Hillsdale's former faculty members disputes the developmental interpretation of the trivium in an essay entitled "The Limits of the Trivium," still prominently featured on the recommended reading website for Hilldale's Barney Charter School Initiative (Hillsdale College, n.d.-c).

4.6 Pedagogy

Barnes (2014) has identified several pedagogical practices she believes occur relatively consistently across interpretations of classical learning, including "curricular oddities" (p. 21) such as the use of *progymnasmata* (preliminary exercises) and *imitatio* (skill modeling followed by student imitation) and "copious memorization" (p. 22). Indeed, classical educators appear comfortable with the practice of direct, teacher-centered instruction and activities to promote the memorization of material, especially in the younger years (Bortins, 2010; Gibbs, 2019; Littlejohn and Evans, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Veith and Kern, 2015). Hart (2006) stresses that classical educators are teachers, not progressive facilitators (p. 96). K-12 classical educators value the acquisition of factual knowledge – especially in the grammar stage of the trivium – as a necessary challenge and a step toward the logic and rhetoric stages of learning and development. They take issue with what they perceive as a modern tendency to denigrate teaching strategies emphasizing the memorization of information in favor of more amusing and less strenuous activities (Bortins, 2010; Littlejohn and Evans, 2006; Veith and Kern, 2015).

Douglas Wilson, credited founder of Christian classical education in the 1980s, may be the source of a countercultural, anti-academic-establishment streak in the literature. Wilson (1991) wrote that classical education is one "not buffeted by the latest wind of doctrine to blow out of our colleges of education" (p. 87). Published classical educators do not espouse any widely accepted or readily identifiable theories of learning or development. Wary references to federal interference, dismal public schooling, faulty progressive ideology, and incompetent modern pedagogies are easy to find in the literature (Simmons, 2012; Perrin, 2014; Veith and Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). Classical education is not mainstream: "It's not what everyone else is doing. It marches to a different drummer...It's not in line with modern philosophies...It's countercultural" (Kreeft, 2019, p. 15).

5. Conclusion

Despite small variations in perspective, published classical educators and K-12 classical organizations share an interest in the liberal arts, “Great Books” of the Western canon, the pursuit of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, Latin study, an understanding of the trivium as tools of learning and/or as a model for learning and development, and interest in pedagogies which place the teacher in a leadership role and value memorization as a necessary skill for intellectual advancement in any discipline. Also frequently expressed are concerns about moral and ethical character development and the integration of knowledge across subjects.

This operative definition for K-12 classical education based upon recurrent themes in the literature has been carefully derived and constructed. Yet we must question its accuracy because it lacks the perspectives of K-12 classical schools and unpublished educators working within them. These institutions and the people are most responsible for realizing a classical approach to education on the ground. Recent research suggests that K-12 classical schools may diverge from the practices recommended in the literature and may not emphasize the curricular elements laid out in this review (Richardi, 2022). More research is required to determine the relationship between the available literature and the philosophies and practices in use at K-12 classical schools across the United States. How individual classical schools choose to modify the classical approach described in the literature to address the specific needs of their students is an important question left unanswered by this review.

Much ink has been spilled by a dedicated community of classical educators and organizations to sell their unique approach to K-12 education, with little challenge from within or without. A concerted effort among the members of the educational research community to investigate the practice, experience, and outcomes of K-12 classical schooling is sorely needed. The use of an ancient curriculum to promote academic achievement today is an innovative strategy, for better or for worse. It is the author’s hope that the outline of shared curricular elements and working definition provided here will spur interest in K-12 classical education and encourage future research on this peculiar approach to teaching and learning.

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