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

Courtney: [00:00:11] Hello! Welcome listeners, to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. In today's show, we'll talk about a common question: What is classical education? We've also found, yeah, another problematic curricula list. And finally, we'll talk about Scientific Connections Through Inquiry and why we probably won't use it.

[00:00:32] So let's begin with that question: What is classical education?

[00:00:36] Anyone who knows me knows that I'm a big fan of the Well Trained Mind. I like to refer to Susan Wise Bauer's idea of classical education. It's a three part process of training the mind, hence her book, The Well Trained Mind. In that sort of division, we have early years of school are spent factual learning, in logic stage in the middle grades. They think through arguments and make connections between those facts. In high school years it's about expressing your command of those facts and writing persuasive essays and speaking persuasively.

[00:01:11] There are terms of art in that. The very first stage with our youngest children, they call the Grammar stage. What I found really interesting is that there is actually some scientific basis for this Grammar stage emphasis on facts in terms of how the brain is wired. The ancient Greeks may not have had the technology that we have and they might not have held craftsmanship and technology in the same esteem that we do, but they were by no means stupid.

Jen: [00:01:41] Of course not!

Courtney: [00:01:42] I think a lot of people, when they study history, they're like, oh, why would you do that. Oh, that's such a stupid thing to do. Oh, why do they think that. That's so obviously false.

Jen: [00:01:49] Why didn't they ask the ancient aliens?

Courtney: [00:01:51] No, they weren't stupid. They knew what they were doing. They had a keen observation of how people mature and develop from

grammar to logic to rhetoric. Logic would be the middle school, and rhetoric is a high school stage. We take facts, and we make connections from them and we argue about them. It's actually down with cognitive science as far as I can tell.

Jen: [00:02:09] It's pretty solid.

Courtney: [00:02:11] The problem is that there are some rotating definitions of classical education. There are three main tracks that people can go with this. The first one is great books or western canon. The dead white guys version. While it's true that people like to define the western canon a la Harold Bloom or Mortimer Adler, or even Harvard's Books by the Foot, I agree with Susan Wise Bauer when she says there is no definitive canon. There are no books that are absolutely definitively canonical works. That that list is going to change on your perspective and who you are and your place in time.

[00:02:52] My personal definition of a classical book is one that I can reread and come back to and learn something from at different times and different stages in my life.

Jen: [00:03:04] That's also my definition and I'd add those books are going to be different for individuals. There's no way I can give you a list of books you will be able to personally connect with and continue to draw lessons from through the stages of your child's education or even as an adult for your own. You can narrow down a giant list, but then you almost have to go with the perusal method where you start reading a bunch of books. You can either get something out of it or you can't. You'll know because it's a book that you want to read it on Kindle and you want to own it in hardback. Or you check it out of the library four times and realize, I should just get this for Christmas, and then you can mark it up.

[00:03:46] I just don't see how any one person can tell another person, these are the books you have to read.

Courtney: [00:03:46] I think there are some books that it behooves one to become familiar with.

Jen: [00:03:54] Well, sure, like the Bible, like—

Courtney: [00:03:56] Like the Iliad. And the Odyssey.

Jen: [00:03:57] Right, or the Iliad, yeah. Oh, and the Iliad and the Odyssey are perfect examples for grammar, logic, rhetoric. If you take your little kid through it in the grammar stage, through a very simplified picture book.

In the logic stage, I found some great graphic novels of the Iliad and the Odyssey. And then in the rhetoric stage, they read the original. It's so much easier because they already know the plot.

Courtney: [00:04:19] Absolutely. I have Black Ships Before Troy scheduled for Elena this year. There are also hard to find, generally out of print, middle grade adaptations of some of those, which are nice. And then—

Jen: [00:04:32] Oh, you know, I think I might have those and I didn't know they're out of print now.

Courtney: [00:04:34] Now, that's one way of looking at classical education, is that sort of literature-centered education. We read a lot of books at my house. I spend a lot of money on books. But there's also this perspective of classical education as being about the classical languages.

[00:04:51] The other perspective that we started with was the method. Part of that for me is emphasis on science and history and geography in the K-8. More language analysis. For example, sentence diagramming. That literature emphasis that we talked about, as opposed to screens or experiential, ie: unschooling. Building key background knowledge with a knowledge-rich curriculum. So yes, at my house, we do Latin, but it is not the point of our classical homeschooling. Other people may vary on that, of course.

Jen: [00:05:23] Yeah, a lot of people ask me, can you classically homeschool without Latin. I think you could, but I also think it isn't what most people mean when they say they are classically educating. It's almost a classical = you are studying Latin or Greek or both. That's something worth discussing, because the methodology should change with the times and the point of Latin, at our house, is to teach English grammar and logic skills actually speaking Latin to someone else is just a side benefit. So I've had the thought, could you sub in another modern language. Maybe you could. If you were getting the same benefits from it, I can admit that I'm not educated in languages enough to know which are similar enough to give your brain the same exact outcome.

Courtney: [00:06:08] That does make sense. For example, Gwen is also studying Spanish, but I don't think it's nearly as difficult as Latin and I think she does well in Spanish because she had that rigorous analytical structure in Latin.

Jen: [00:06:22] I think it's true that learning Latin is basically logic. It makes sense. There are a lot of rules, there's a lot of memorization. That is where starting that in the grammar stage is helpful because kids of that

age can memorize well and they enjoy it. If you learn Latin first, you're learning... is there seven cases?

Courtney: [00:06:40] Oh, I don't even remember. I totally outsourced—

Jen: [00:06:43] There's like seven. And then I think, as a comparison, when you learn Spanish, there's two or three. So if you learn Latin first, any other language is going to be easier. Learn Latin at home or subbing it out without too much effort because there are a lot of good Latin programs. I prefer scripted programs. I have a choice of programs. In Europe, students learn two or three languages routinely, and that's everyone. That's not just the gifted kids.

Courtney: [00:07:08] Oh yeah.

Jen: [00:07:08] It's everyone from age six upwards. I think learning any additional language other than your native language would provide more neurological growth than not.

Courtney: [00:07:17] Well, absolutely. You're making neural connections. I would like to second that I think it's important our children learn other languages for their citizenship. In the United States, we don't have an official language, but there is a large population of people who speak Spanish. While most people speak English, I think it behooves us as a good citizen to be able to speak with all the other people in the country who speak Spanish as well, which is why Gwen is studying Spanish. That's just a value judgment on my part. I don't think it makes it classical or not.

Jen: [00:07:47] Oh, I agree.

Courtney: [00:07:48] I think it would be irresponsible of us to talk about what is classical education without talking about how white supremacists have taken classical education and used it as justification for their viewpoints. That whole thing about western civilization is actually pretty definitively linked to the growth of white supremacy in modern culture. While I don't want to get into the details, Dr. Rebecca Futo-Kennedy has done a pretty extensive study. She's given professional talks on this, and you can talk out her blog where she lays out the evidence for you. Given this is not something that people tend to want to talk about because it's kind of hurtful to think that this thing that we value, that we love, that we think is so important for our children might actually be hijacked by such unpleasant people. We also want to make sure that when we make our homeschool purchases we are spending our money wisely and that we

aren't accidentally promoting white supremacy. So that's something to think about.

Jen: [00:08:49] That's part of the responsibility of home education. You are the ultimate authority in your homeschool. You need to vet all your materials.

Courtney: [00:08:58] That you make wise ethical choices.

Jen: [00:09:01] There you go.

Courtney: [00:09:01] When you are choosing homeschool curricula, particularly classical education curricula, make sure that you're making good choices.

[00:09:08] One of the things that helps make good choices is experienced homeschoolers. This is why we're doing this, right?

Jen: [00:09:14] Right.

Courtney: [00:09:14] Jen and I don't live in the same area of the country. I live in West Virginia, and Jen, you're in Chicago, right? We have both seen this image list of photo file of recommended homeschool curricula directed at new homeschoolers this fall, floating around both of our states, shockingly similar. Have almost word-for-word the same curricula on it. We're not happy about this list. Jen, do you want to tell us why we're not happy?

Jen: [00:09:41] These lists are on state websites or they're being put out by school boards. At first I was trying to be fair, and I thought, oh, it is the same list and someone's just sharing it in social media like you do. But they aren't exactly the same. Someone is tweaking them, but they all have the same thing in common. They're leaving out a lot of the strictly secular choices. They're leaving out certain faith-based curriculum companies. The whole list is vanilla Christian flavored.

Courtney: [00:10:13] I would say Evangelical-Protestant.

Jen: [00:10:14] Evangelical-Protestant-based curriculum, making it appear that those are the only choices.

Courtney: [00:10:20] When, in fact, high quality, well-regarded, rigorous, well-accepted Catholic and secular curricula exist. They're just missing from these lists. These are lists that are specifically being aimed at homeschoolers new this fall. I didn't double check the list that you had, Jen, but on my list, the religious curricula aren't marked. And new

homeschoolers are often surprised when a curricula that is popular and well-regarded, they order, and it's religious. They didn't know.

Jen: [00:10:49] Yeah, the list I had from Indiana, I don't think it was marked. I think the categories were what kind of homeschooling and that in itself was funny, because if you're a new homeschooler, you don't know what any of those things mean.

Courtney: [00:11:00] A lot of public school teachers wouldn't know what those things mean. And I say that as someone who used to teach public schools. They're not the best lists. One of the things that I think that we can do here, is to offer an alternative. First way is something called Neutral science. Neutral science omits information about the age of the Earth and the age of the universe, and it completely skips over evolution. Religious kits typically include creation science. It is important when you are selecting your curriculum that you think about whether or not you want these things to be included. There are full curricula sets for multiple grades, with mainstream science. The kind of science that your child would receive in public school. For example, Moving Beyond the Page, Calvert Education.

Jen: [00:11:45] Early 2000s Calvert was awesome. This Calvert, if you're on a boat in the middle of the ocean, then go ahead and get Calvert, if you have an internet connection there.

Courtney: [00:11:54] Oak Meadow is very popular. It bills itself as being progressive. It's like Build Your Library, which is a secular literature-based homeschool curriculum.

[00:12:04] Rainbow Resources actually came out with secular kit. Timberdoodle. A lot of people don't realize that Timberdoodle, quote-unquote, "Offers products with a Gospel perspective." And so they use a neutral science. People might not realize that. And Bookshark also does neutral. Now Jen, you want to tell us about Bookshark?

Jen: [00:12:20] Sure, Bookshark is owned by one giant company called Inquisicorp who owns Sonlight and Bookshark. Sonlight has been around since the gos and Bookshark is fairly recent. It's maybe eight or 10 years old. Basically Sonlight realized that people in states with charter schools could not order their curriculum from Sonlight because it is a Christian curriculum. So they started a new company under their umbrella called Bookshark where they have the same program with the same daily schedule, and they took all of the religious and Bible studies out of it.

Courtney: [00:12:55] Mm-hmm.

Jen: [00:12:56] So if, as many people were doing for years, including myself, I loved all the books included in Sonlight but I would buy it piecemeal because I didn't want to pay for the religious, Evangelical Christian... I didn't really want to hear about all of the Evangelical stuff.

Courtney: [00:13:10] Let's just say that there are some publicly known issues about that company and their view of American history and if you want to Google that with the Well Trained Mind boards, you can find that for yourself. There are school in a box kits with religion. One of my favorites is from Memoria Press. They have what they call a classical core curriculum. It is explicitly Christian. It is explicitly what they say, quote-unquote, the "cultural heritage of the Christian west."

Jen: [00:13:38] I've managed to secularize them, also.

Courtney: [00:13:40] And now they have that secular charter school line.

Jen: [00:13:42] They do. They don't have everything available, but they have a lot available.

Courtney: [00:13:48] Christian Light Education, very popular. We already mentioned Sonlight. Abeka, "based in Biblical principles." Bob Jones University, BJU, "solid Biblical worldview." And then there are several Catholic programs. Our Lady of Victory that uses the Latin Tridentine Mass. Seton Home Study School, which is a huge program. I did not know until I looked it up that they have approximately 12,000 homeschooled students in their program. Did you know they were that big?

Jen: [00:14:19] That's where I first started homeschooling, was with Seton. All the people I knew in my little town used Seton, and so when I decided to pull my oldest two boys, I ordered Seton as well. They are huge. They've been doing this forever. They very good at helping parents learn to teach their children. I wouldn't say it's necessarily classical. I would lean more toward school at home.

Courtney: [00:14:41] But very Catholic.

Jen: [00:14:41] Well, yes. And very Catholic. And you can't really secularize.

Courtney: [00:14:45] Finally, I want to shout out Kolbe. Very Catholic, classical western civilization people. Also interesting for me, though, is that they offer mainstream science.

Jen: [00:14:54] There is a science czar at the Vatican.

Courtney: [00:14:58] The Jesuits.

Jen: [00:14:59] Yeah, they believe in old Earth. They gel right alongside current scientific research.

Courtney: [00:15:05] So those are some alternate programs. We just wanted to let you know that these things exist. That they're out there. That there are secular programs, that some of them are very highly regarded and that we like some of them, too.

Jen: [00:15:15] Well, also, the fact that the Well Trained Mind isn't on any of these lists.

Courtney: [00:15:19] Which is kind of interesting because the book, The Well Trained Mind, has sold over a half a million copies, so you would think that anything based on a book that popular would be on somebody's mind. Things that make you go, "Hmm."

[00:15:33] The curriculum that we want to talk about today is called Scientific Connections Through Inquiry, which is based on Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding, which we kind of joke about as the best worst science curriculum for elementary school.

Jen: [00:15:47] The curriculum that everyone buys and wants to work so badly and then resells it later.

Courtney: [00:15:55] I keep mine, thank you very much, but I'm a hard-core science person. I have the background to make it work and I think a lot of people don't. So when I heard someone was making it better, I was kind of interested. So I went ahead and I bought Level 3, which is the Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding Volume 2. I sat down with level 3 and my handy-dandy copy of volume 2 yesterday. I compared the two. Direct comparison. I noticed Level 3, I guess it's for grade 3, covers ten of 32 lessons from BFS Volume 2, which is about a third. Sounds all right. It's very pretty.

Jen: [00:16:30] It is very pretty. It would use a lot of ink to print that out. As an ink-conscious mom.

Courtney: [00:16:35] It would. I just went with the first lesson in the book, sat down with that lesson and did a comparison. So in BFSU, volume 2, this would be lesson B13. And when I opened it up, I noticed Dr. Noble said it would call for two or more sessions of an hour each, whereas SCI takes four sessions to cover the same material. I thought that was kind of interesting that they break it up that much. SCI keeps pretty much the

same equipment kit except they add a methylene blue stain for animal cells as a prep material, which is cool. They skip three of the set of seven recommended picture books, and I'm going to guess that they're out of print, maybe and that's why they didn't recommend them. Which is fine, whatever.

[00:17:15] What I thought was interesting is that it does not assume prior use of pocket magnifiers. Pocket magnifiers are a huge deal in Volume 1, so I guess they're assuming that kids are just going to pick up and start with this here, so that's nice. It uses the same introductory directions for parents but it's formatted just beautifully.

Jen: [00:17:34] It is.

Courtney: [00:17:34] It does add—I don't know who the graphic designer was, but they're on fire. They added extra directions for how to use a microscope, talked more about how as you zoom in, you have a more limited field of view, which was really nice. That's a tricky concept.

[00:17:48] And what I also liked about it is that it called out the student notebook pages in sequence. It comes with a student notebook. That is one of the failings, I think, of the original one, is that it's just like, oh, grab a composition book, write in it yourself. This has a custom designed student notebook, which is really nice. This is all in session one. That is the whole heart of session one, which I thought was kind of short for a third grader. That would take, like 15 minutes.

Jen: [00:18:13] Unless you're doing science every day, but you're probably not.

Courtney: [00:18:17] [crosstalk] you're probably not. But even if you did, that's short. It does add extra directions for parents. It does define terms for parents. For example, it adds a more thorough definition of tissue in terms of biology, which BFSU doesn't actually do. But I don't need somebody to define biological tissue for me. That's kind of interesting.

[00:18:37] It does skip two of the nine BFSU outcomes. It actually does not cover as much. It is much prettier, but it's still very text-heavy, and my primary objection to this would be that the key questions are still not called out. They're not bolded or highlighted. There are no sample questions and answers. I don't know about you, but if I'm buying this, the primary reason I'm buying this is to make my life easier.

Jen: [00:19:05] Right.

Courtney: [00:19:05] And part of the reason that people love BFSU is because he asks good questions. And it's very pretty but it still doesn't say, this is the question that you should ask and have it in bold, ask student: bing bing bing bing. It doesn't do that.

[00:19:20] I also like that there's a student notebook, but what I don't like is that it involves significant cutting and pasting. This, to me, is the sign of a low-level time waster. If I'm going to do science, I want to do science. I don't want to sit around and do arts and crafts. Of course, I also hate lap books, so, take that with a grain of salt.

[00:19:38] I think I'd just like to buy the student notebook because SCI still requires me to dig in and find the key questions myself. Basically, what I paid is \$40 for somebody to reformat BFSU and make it pretty. It's very pretty. They didn't call out the key questions that are the heart of the program and they skipped the historical and extension questions.

[00:19:59] Good teaching helps student hook knowledge onto prior pegs. They talk about this in the Well Trained Mind. You pick pegs to hang your student's knowledge on. Modern teacher terms, we call this a schema. I'm going to ask students to add knowledge to their schema.

[00:20:13] When SCI skips the historical and extension questions they're skipping those pegs, those historical hooks, those ways to add things to schema. I don't like that. So an instructional designer's input could have been valuable here.

[00:20:31] I mean, if you absolutely cannot stand the endless pages of type in BFSU, by all means, pay out the \$40 for SCI. If you don't mind we're not talking to the students about the history, then by all means, go for it. But I'm happy to just pay \$10 on Kindle for the ugly version.

Jen: [00:20:48] Well, and you can highlight that. That's what I did when I used it for the one year.

Courtney: [00:20:51] You highlighted your Kindle?

Jen: [00:20:53] Yeah, I had BFSU on the Kindle and I just highlighted all the questions and everything that I wanted to say and then it stood out.

Courtney: [00:21:00] Yeah, I did that too, and they could have done that with SCI, but it's not in there.

Jen: [00:21:03] The only thing I will say is their samples online were not enough for me to make a decision, so I actually went on YouTube and I found a video where someone was paging through the book, and again,

was struck at how beautiful it was. So of course they made a YouTube video, because it's so pretty.

Courtney: [00:21:21] It is very pretty.

Jen: [00:21:22] It's very pretty and it just makes you think sunshine and rainbows and you're all going to sit down and learn science and it's just going to be great. Only I still just don't feel like the content was there. I feel like they cut out the meat. Kids don't want it to be too easy.

Courtney: [00:21:36] Especially the kind of person who's going to pick up BFSU, is a person who likes science. If you're not that into science, you want to pick up something like Evan-Moor's Daily Science, which is fine. I recommend that to people all the time. But if you're going to be a science-intensive person, let's get sciency.

Jen: [00:21:52] Yeah, yeah. I would just rather save my money and buy a nice microscope or more hands-on things. Not crafts. Not lap books. Not those. Not glitter. Not glue.

Courtney: [00:22:01] Not cutting and pasting.

Jen: [00:22:03] No. No. No, thank you.

Courtney: [00:22:04] All right listeners. Make sure to join our Facebook group, the Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers if you haven't already, where we talk about homeschooling all the time with many veteran homeschoolers.

[00:22:14] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschool. Before we go, show some love for your new favorite podcast by leaving us a review.