

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES AND TEACHING APPROACHES¹

There are four educational philosophies influencing education today. Think of these philosophies as the underlying assumptions about what comprises an education and what the teaching materials should cover in a course of study. All of the common teaching approaches available to home educators contain elements of these four educational philosophies.

The first educational philosophy is *essentialism*. Essentialism assumes that there is a core body of knowledge that must be mastered in order for a person to be considered "educated." It focuses on the "essentials" and is subject oriented. Essentialism could be summed up in this phrase: "Information is the key to a good education."

Perennialism is more "idea" oriented, and considers education to consist of becoming acquainted with the great writing and thinking throughout history. To perennialists, "understanding is the key to a good education."

Progressivism seeks to make education practical and applicable to the needs of students and society. It assumes that making knowledge and skills meaningful are the keys to a good education.

Existentialism stresses "authenticity" – the commitment to finding true being. To the existentialist, discovering one's own meaning and purpose in life is the key to a good education.

Common Teaching Approaches

All home schooling materials fall into two main categories: traditional textbook curricula and non-textbook curricula.

The Traditional Approach

In the **Traditional Approach**, graded textbooks or workbooks follow a scope and sequence that covers each subject in 180 daily increments over a span of 12 years. Teacher's manuals, tests, and record keeping materials are usually available that correspond to each of the texts. Textbook curricula assume you will run your home school like an institutional school.

Some questions to ask yourself before trying the traditional, textbook approach are listed below. "Yes" answers indicate this approach may work for you and your child:

1. Did my child perform well in a school classroom?
2. Does my child like to complete assignments and to have defined goals?
3. Is my child academically oriented?
4. Will my child complete assigned tasks with a minimum of prodding from me?
5. Am I the kind of person who will follow through with the lesson plans and pace of the course of instruction?

Some additional questions to ask before using the workbook approach with your child:

1. Does my child read well and have good reading comprehension skills?
2. Can my child work well independently?
3. Can my child learn without a lot of variety to the teaching materials?

Strengths of the Textbook/Worktext Approach:

- Everything is laid out for ease of use
- Follows a standardized scope and sequence
- Has definite milestones of accomplishment
- Testing and assigning grades is easy to do

Weaknesses of the Textbook/Worktext Approach:

- ◆ Is geared to the "generic" child. Does not take into account individual learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, or interests
- ◆ Assumes that there is a body of information that comprises an education and that this information can be broken down into daily increments
- ◆ Treats children's minds like containers to be filled with information
- ◆ Focuses on transmitting information through artificial learning experiences
- ◆ Is teacher-directed and chalkboard oriented
- ◆ Different aged students study different materials
- ◆ Expensive when teaching multiple children
- ◆ Discourages original, independent thinking
- ◆ Has a high "burn out" rate

Non-Textbook Approaches

Although there are a number of excellent textbook and worktext programs available, many home educators object to the fact that textbooks are teacher-directed, chalkboard-oriented, and seldom take into account different teaching approaches or the different ways children receive and process information.

These parents have found alternative teaching approaches that allow them to tailor their home schooling to their family's particular needs. The following pages briefly explain the five most common non-textbook teaching approaches:

- The **Classical Approach** is derived from successful courses of study throughout history and recently revived through the writings of Dorothy Sayers.
- The **Principle Approach** is based on the premise that our nation is a unique and vital link in the westward chain of Christianity.
- The **Living Books and Life Experiences Approach** of Charlotte Mason treats children as persons, not as containers to be filled with information.
- The **Unit Study Approach** integrates several subject areas around a Common theme.
- **Unschooling** assumes that children are natural learners and gives them resources to do so.

The Classical Approach

The **Classical Approach** to education has produced great minds throughout history, and has strong elements of perennialism.

In the Classical Approach, children under age 18 are taught tools of learning collectively known as The Trivium. The Trivium has three parts, each part corresponding to a childhood developmental stage.

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The first stage of the Trivium, the Grammar Stage, covers early elementary ages. The goal of this stage is to develop a general framework of knowledge and to acquire basic language arts and math skills.

At approximately middle school age, children begin to demonstrate independent or abstract thought (usually by becoming argumentative or opinionated). This signals the beginning of the Dialectic Stage in which the child's tendency to argue is molded and shaped by teaching logical discussion, debate, and how to draw correct conclusions and support them with facts. The goal of this stage is to equip the child with language and thinking skills capable of detecting fallacies in an argument.

The final phase of the Trivium, the Rhetoric Stage, seeks to produce a student who can use language, both written and spoken, eloquently and persuasively. Students are usually ready for this stage by age 15.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before trying the classical approach with your child:

1. Does my family like to read good literature?
2. Are my children intellectually oriented and comfortable with a rigorous academic program?
3. Am I a learner? Am I comfortable learning alongside my children so I can teach them things I never studied?
4. Do I like to study and discuss ideas that have influenced civilization?

Strengths of the Classical Approach:

- ❖ Is tailored to stages of mental development
- ❖ Teaches thinking skills & verbal/written expression
- ❖ Creates self-learners
- ❖ Has produced great minds throughout history

Weaknesses of the Classical Approach:

- Very little prepared curriculum available
- Requires a scholarly teacher and student
- May overemphasize ancient disciplines and classics

The Unit Study Approach

A **Unit Study** takes a theme or topic (a unit of study) and delves into it deeply over a period of time, integrating language arts, science, social studies, math, and fine arts as they apply. Instead of studying eight or ten separate, unrelated subjects, all subjects are blended together and studied around a common theme or project. For example, a unit study on birds could include reading and writing about birds and about famous ornithologists (language arts), studying the parts, functions, and life cycles of birds and perhaps even the aerodynamics of flight (science and math), determining the migration paths, habitats, and ecological/sociological impact of birds (social studies), sketching familiar birds (art), building bird houses or feeders ("hands-on" activities) and so forth.

Several fine prepared unit study curricula are available, but it is easy to prepare your own unit studies around areas of interest.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before trying unit studies with your children:

1. Am I a creative person?
2. Do I like trying to make everything interesting and fun?
3. Do my children have a variety of interests and learning styles?

4. Can I live with the fact that there may be "gaps" in my children's education?
5. Do I have the time and energy to be the driving, creative force behind the development of units?

Strengths of the Unit Study Approach:

- ⇒ All ages can learn together
- ⇒ Children can delve as deeply or as lightly into a subject as they like
- ⇒ The family's interests can be pursued
- ⇒ Students get the whole picture
- ⇒ Curiosity and independent thinking are generated
- ⇒ Intense study of one topic is the more natural way to learn
- ⇒ Knowledge is interrelated so is learned easily and remembered longer
- ⇒ Unit studies are fairly easy to create

Weaknesses of the Unit Study Approach:

- ⇒ It is easy to leave educational "gaps"
- ⇒ Hard to assess the level of learning occurring
- ⇒ Record keeping may be difficult.
- ⇒ Prepared unit study curricula are expensive
- ⇒ Do-it-yourself unit studies require planning
- ⇒ Too many activity-oriented unit studies may cause burn-out of teacher and student
- ⇒ Subjects that are hard to integrate into the unit may be neglected.

The Living Books Approach

The **Living Books Approach** is based on the writings of Charlotte Mason, a turn-of-the-century British educator. Miss Mason was appalled by several tendencies she noticed in modern education: (1) the tendency to treat children as containers to be filled with predigested information instead of as human beings; (2) the tendency to break down knowledge into thousands of isolated bits of information to be fed into "container" children; and (3) the tendency to engineer artificial learning experiences. She believed in respecting children as persons, in involving them in real-life situations, and in allowing them to read really good books instead of what she called "twaddle"—worthless, inferior teaching material.

Mason's approach to academics was to teach basic reading, writing, and math skills, then expose children to the best sources of knowledge for all other subjects. This meant giving children experiences like nature walks, observing and collecting wildlife; visiting art museums; and reading real books with "living ideas." She called such books "living books" because they made the subject "come alive" unlike textbooks that tend to be dry and dull and assume the reader cannot think for him/herself.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before trying the Charlotte Mason method:

1. Does our family love to read, both alone and together through reading aloud?
2. Do we love to go to the library?
3. Am I comfortable with more of a "free-form" approach to learning?
4. Will I follow through with teaching my children good habits and character qualities?
5. Do I trust my children to learn on their own?
6. Will I follow through with exposing my children

firsthand to nature and to great art?

Strengths of the Living Books Approach:

- ★ Treats children as active participants in the learning process
- ★ Exposes children to real objects and books instead of interactions with distilled information
- ★ Encourages curiosity, creative thinking, and a love of learning
- ★ Eliminates meaningless tasks, busywork
- ★ Developmentally appropriate.
- ★ Stresses formation of good character and habits

Weaknesses of the Living Books Approach:

- ✚ Tends to be very child centered
- ✚ Very little prepared curriculum
- ✚ May neglect higher level studies because of its emphasis on art, literature, and nature study
- ✚ May become too eclectic

The Principle Approach

The **Principle Approach** is an effort to restore to American Christians three vital concepts: the knowledge of our Christian history; an understanding of our role in the spread of Christianity; and the ability to live according to the Biblical principles upon which our country was founded. The Principle Approach is a way of living life, not just a way of educating children.

Four emphases are unique to this educational approach. First, there is a recognition of God's Hand (Providence) in history. Second, there is the understanding that God has ordained three governmental institutions (the home, the church, and civil government) through which He unfolds His purposes and manifests Christ on this earth. Third, each Christian is responsible for extending God's government. Fourth, the student assumes responsibility for learning and for applying knowledge to his own life.

The Principle Approach may be applied to the study of any subject with the use of notebooks to record "the 4 Rs" (**R**esearching God's Word; **R**easoning from the researched Biblical truths/principles; **R**elating the truths and principles discovered to the subject and the student's character; and **R**ecording the individual application of the Biblical principles to the subject and the student).

Here are some questions to ask yourself before trying the Principle Approach:

1. Do I have a real concern for the application of Christian principles to my family and my nation?
2. Will my child assume responsibility for a great deal of learning on his/her own?
3. Does my child like to express him or herself through writing?
4. Am I willing to undertake extensive biblical researched teaching preparation?

Strengths of the Principle Approach:

- ☞ Students learn to think "governmentally"
- ☞ Students become self-learners
- ☞ Students learn to apply biblical principles whole of life
- ☞ Students create their own "textbooks"

Weaknesses of the Principle Approach:

- May present a narrow view of life and of history
- Focuses mainly on American history
- Requires a great deal of teacher preparation
- Prepared curriculum available in few subjects
- Extremely literal approach to Scripture

The Unschooling Approach

On the one hand, the Unschooling Approach is defined by John Holt, a 20th century American educator who concluded that children have an innate desire to learn and a curiosity that drives them to learn what they need to know when they need to know it. Holt believed that both desire and curiosity are destroyed by the usual methods of teaching. In his book *Teach Your Own*, Holt wrote: "What children need is not new and better curricula but access to more and more of the real world; plenty of time and space to think over their experiences, and to use fantasy and play to make meaning out of them; and advice, road maps, guidebooks, to make it easier for them to get where they want to go (not where we think they ought to go), and to find out what they want to find out."

On the other hand, unschooling refers to any less-structured learning approach that allows children to pursue their own interests with parental support and guidance. The child is surrounded by a rich environment of books, learning resources, and adults who model a lifestyle of learning and are willing to interact with him. Formal academics are pursued when the need arises.

Some questions to ask yourself before trying the

Unschooling Approach:

1. Am I comfortable with few pre-set goals and little structure?
2. Do my children have strong interests in particular areas?
3. Does my family have a lot of natural curiosity and love learning?

Strengths of the Unschooling Approach:

- Takes little planning
- Captures the child's "teachable moments"
- Children have access to the real world, plenty of time and space to figure things out on their own.
- Children are less likely to become academically frustrated or "burned out"
- Children can delve into a subject as deeply or as shallowly as they desire
- Provides a discipleship model of learning
- Creates self-learners with a love of learning

Weaknesses of the Unschooling Approach:

- ❖ May neglect some subjects
- ❖ Hard to assess level of learning
- ❖ Lacks the security of a clearly laid out program
- ❖ Is extremely child-centered
- ❖ Difficult to explain to others
- ❖ May be overly optimistic about what children will accomplish on their own