

CHARLOTTE MASON EDUCATION: ONE MOTHER'S INTERPRETATION

Some thoughts from Barb

(Quotes are from 'School Education' by Charlotte Mason)

1. Introduction

Charlotte Mason believed *'that work which is of most importance to society is the bringing-up and instruction of the children—more than anything else [it is] the home influences brought to bear upon the child that determine the character and career of the future man or woman.'*

Charlotte Mason lived in England from 1842 to 1923 and is considered to be one of the founding influences in the home schooling movement. She was a dedicated Christian teacher who developed an educational philosophy that stressed bringing broad and stimulating education to a child in a non-competitive, biblically-based way. The 'Synopsis of Educational Theory' developed by her schools is given in Appendix 1.

Despite possible impressions given by some modern devotees of Charlotte Mason's educational theory, her own approach was extremely disciplined and built upon a firm foundation of her faith in God and a strong sense of responsibility to society. This is embodied in the motto of her schools: *'I am, I can, I ought, I will'*.

One anecdote I recall was Charlotte Mason greeting a new student teacher at her training college with the question "What have you come here for?" The student answered, "To learn how to teach". Charlotte Mason replied, "No, you have come here to learn how to live." Education was such an integral part of life to Charlotte that her life was an orderly sequence of self-education.

Her goal in education is summarised by the quote: *'The question is not,—How much does the youth know? when he has finished his education—but how much does he care? and about how many orders of things does he care? In fact, how large is the room in which he finds his feet set? and, therefore, how full is the life he has before him?'* (p170)

2. Philosophy

2.1 Principles

'Three principles which underlie (the Charlotte Mason) educational thought are:

- (a) The recognition of authority as a fundamental principle, as universal and as inevitable in the moral world as is that of gravitation in the physical;*
- (b) the recognition of the physical basis of habits and of the important part which the formation of habits plays in education;*
- (c) the recognition of the vital character and inspiring power of ideas.'* (p126)

'Knowing that the brain is the physical seat of habit and that conduct and character, alike, are the outcome of the habits we allow; knowing, too, that an inspiring idea initiates a new habit of thought, and hence, a new habit of life; we perceive that the great work of education is to inspire children with vitalising ideas as to every relation of life, every department of knowledge, every subject of thought: and to give deliberate care to the formation of those habits of the good life which are the outcome of vitalising ideas. In this great work we seek and assuredly find the co-operation of the Divine Spirit, whom we

recognise, in a sense rather new to modern thought, as the supreme Educator of mankind in things that have been called secular, fully as much as in those that have been called sacred.’ (p172-3)

2.1.1 Authority

Charlotte’s writings are based on the premise that all authority comes from God. Parental authority is deputed from His ultimate Authority. The appropriate response to authority is docility (obedience), both in the context of humans to God, and children to parents. Her entire method of education requires an attitude of subservience in life, a striving to do one’s duty rather than indulge in one’s choice.

‘It would be good work to keep to the front this idea of living under authority, a discipline of life readily self-embraced by children, in whom the heroic impulse is always strong. We would not reduce the pleasures of childhood and youth by an iota; rather we would increase them, for the disciplined life has more power of fresh enjoyment than is given to the unrestrained.’(p103)

‘It is not authority which punishes: the penalties which follow us through life, of which those in the family are a faint foretaste, are the inevitable consequences of broken law, whether moral or physical, and from which authority, strong and benign, exists to save us by prevention, and, if needs be, by lesser and corrective penalties.’ (p139)

‘Children are born persons’ means they need respect (not to be confused with nurture, love and security) and Charlotte suggests parents should accord them the same respect they would give their friends. They are not ‘empty vessels’ to be filled, but young souls to whom God has granted personalities and whom he loves as profoundly as any other human beings. ‘We have not to develop the person; he is already there, with every power that will serve him in his passage through life.’ (p75) ‘As one grows older no truth strikes one more than that ‘the child is father to the man’.’ (p133)

However, children need bounds— consistent rules which they are expected to obey. In order to develop self-discipline, a child must have some ‘room’ to choose to obey. The child whose parents allow freedom within known bounds is relieved of the *‘unrest that comes with the constant effort of decision. He is free to do as he ought, but knows quite well in his secret heart that he is not free to do that which he ought not’*. (p31-32) *‘the effort of decision is the greatest effort of life.’ (p20) ‘...it is startling and shocking that there are many children of thoughtful parents whose lives are spent in day-long efforts of decision upon matters which it is their parents’ business to settle for them.’ (p21)*

‘One of the features, and one of the disastrous features, of modern society, is that, in our laziness, we depend upon prodders and encourage a vast system of prodding. We are prodded to do our social duties, to our charitable duties, and to our religious duties. If we pay a subscription to a charity, we expect the secretary to prod us when it becomes due. If we attend a meeting, do we often do so of our own spontaneous will, or because somebody asks us to go and reminds us half a dozen times of the day and the hour? Perhaps it is a result of the hurry of the age that there is a curious division of labour, and society falls into those who prod and those who are prodded. Not that anybody prods in all directions, nor that anybody else offers himself entirely as a pincushion. It is more true, perhaps, to say that we all prod, and that we are all prodded... Human nature is such that we would rather lean up against a wall of spikes than not lean at all. What we must guard against in the training of children is the danger of their getting into the habit of being prodded to every duty and effort. Our whole system of school policy is largely a system of prods. Marks, prizes, exhibitions, are all prods; and a system of prodding is apt to obscure the

meaning of must and ought for the boy or girl who gets into the habit of mental and moral lolling up against his prods.'

Authority should not be viewed as 'breaking the will of the child'. It is training a child to choose to do his 'duty', or accept the consequences.

'There is another notion in the air which tells against the recognition of authority, and that is, the greatly increased respect for individual personality and for the right of each individual to develop on the lines of his own character. But it is a mistake to suppose that the exercise of authority runs counter to any individual development that is not on morally wrong lines.'

'...when our ideal for ourselves and for our children becomes limited to prosperity and comfort, we get these, very likely, for ourselves and for them, but we get no more.' (p83)

2.1.2 Habit

'Habit is worth ten characters': form good habits and an orderly life will follow.

Charlotte Mason suggests working on one habit at a time, and avoid giving lectures—lots of prayer, subtle reminders and positive reinforcement are more effective than nagging, ridicule and punishment. She stresses that constancy is everything—after all children do as we do, not as we say!

'It is an old story that the failures in life are not the people who lack good intentions; they are those whose physical nature has not acquired the habit of prompt and involuntary obedience. The man who can make himself do what he wills has the world before him, and it rests with parents to give their children this self-compelling power as a mere matter of habit.' (p20)

*'Character is the result not merely of the great ideas which are given to us, but of the habits which we labour to form **upon those ideas**.'* (p99)

'Some nine-tenths of our life run upon lines of habit; and that, therefore, in order to educate, we must know something of both the psychological and physiological history of a habit, how to initiate it and how to develop it; and finally, that a human being under education has two functions—the formation of habits and the assimilation of ideas.' (p69)

'...the discipline of habit is at least a third part of the great whole which we call education' (p99)

'Authority must be sustained by habit.' (p105)

'The discipline of habit is never complete until it becomes self-discipline in habits.' (p107)

'Success in life depends largely upon the cultivation of alertness to seize opportunities, and this is largely a physical habit.' (p108)

Some Intellectual Habits include:

'Attention, the power of turning the whole force of the mind upon the subject brought before it;

Concentration, which differs from attention in that the mind is actively engaged on some given problem rather than passively receptive;

Thoroughness, the habit of dissatisfaction with a slipshod, imperfect grasp of a subject, and of mental uneasiness until a satisfying measure of knowledge is obtained;...

Intellectual Volition, the power, of making ourselves think of a given subject at a given time;

Accuracy, which is taught, not only through Arithmetic, but through all the small statements, messages, and affairs of daily life;

Reflection, the ruminating power which is so strongly developed in children and is somehow lost with much besides of the precious cargo they bring with them into the world.

There is nothing sadder than the way we allow intellectual impressions to pass over the surface of our minds, without any effort to retain or assimilate.’ (p120)

2.1.3 Ideas

‘The intellectual life, like every manner of spiritual life, has but one food whereby it lives and grows—the sustenance of living ideas.’ (p121)

‘Ideas of nature, of life, love, duty, heroism—these children find and choose for themselves from the authors they read, who do more for their education than any deliberate teaching’ (p124)

‘A habit becomes morally binding in proportion to the inspiring power of the idea which underlies it.’ (p110)

2.2 Education is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life

‘Education is an Atmosphere, A Discipline, a Life: By this we mean that parents and teachers should know how to make sensible use of a child’s circumstances (atmosphere), should train him in habits of good living (discipline), and should nourish his mind with ideas, the food of intellectual life.’ (p216-7)

‘Of the three clauses of our definition, that which declares that ‘education is an atmosphere’ pleases us most, perhaps, because it is the most inviting to the laissez aller principle of human nature....

But, supposing that ‘Education is an atmosphere’ brings a fresh and vigorous thought to our minds, suppose that it means to us, for our children, sunshine and green fields, pleasant rooms and good pictures, schools where learning is taken in by the gentle act of inspiration, followed by the expiration of all that which is not wanted, where charming teachers compose the children by half-mesmeric effluence which inclines them to do as others do, be as others be—suppose that all this is included in our notion of ‘Education is an atmosphere’, may we not sit at our ease and believe that all is well, and that the whole of education has been accomplished? No; because though we cannot live without air, neither can we live upon air, and children brought up upon ‘environment’ soon begin to show signs of inanition; they have little or no healthy curiosity, power of attention, or of effort; what is worse, they lose spontaneity and initiative; they expect life to drop into them like drops into a rain-tub, without effort or intention on their part.’ (p149-50)

2.3 Education is the Science of Relations

‘A child should be brought up to have relations of force with earth and water, should run and ride, swim and skate, lift and carry; should know texture, and work in material; should know by name, and where and how they live at any rate, the things of the earth about him, its birds and beasts and creeping things, its herbs and trees; should be in touch with the literature, art and thought of the past and the present. I do not mean that he should know all these things; but he should feel, when he reads of it in the newspapers,

the thrill which stirred the Cretan peasants when the frescoes in the palace of King Minos were disclosed to the labour of their spades.’ (p161)

‘In proportion to the range of living relationships we put in his (a pupil’s) way, will he have wide and vital interests, fullness of joy in living. In proportion as he is made aware of the laws which rule every relationship, will his life be dutiful and serviceable: as he learns that no relation with persons or with things, animate or inanimate, can be maintained without strenuous effort, will he learn the laws of work and the joys of work. Our part is to remove obstructions and to give stimulus and guidance to the child who is trying to get into touch with the universe of things and thoughts which belongs to him.’ (p188)

‘We must get rid of the notion that to learn the ‘three R’s’ or the Latin grammar well, a child should learn these and nothing else. It is as true for children as for ourselves that, the wider the range of interests, the more intelligent is the apprehension of each.’ (p209)

2.4 Knowledge versus Information

‘The information acquired in the course of education is only by chance, and here and there, of practical value. Knowledge, on the other hand, that is, the product of the vital action of the mind on the material presented to it, is power; as it implies an increase of intellectual aptitude in new directions, and an always new point of departure.

Perhaps the chief function of a teacher is to distinguish information from knowledge in the acquisition of his pupils. Because knowledge is power, the child who has got knowledge will certainly show power in dealing with it. He will recast, condense, illustrate, or narrate with vividness and with freedom in the arrangement of his words. The child who has only information will write and speak in the stereotyped phrases of his text book, or will mangle in his notes the words of his teacher.’ (p224-5)

‘What a child digs for is his possession; what is poured into his ear, like the idle song of a pleasant singer, floats out as lightly as it came in, and is rarely assimilated.’ (p177)

‘It seems to me that education, which appeals to the desire for wealth (marks, prizes, scholarships, or the like), or to the desire of excelling (as in the taking of places, etc) or to any other of the natural desires, except that for knowledge, destroys the balance of character; and, what is even more fatal, destroys by inanition that desire for and delight in knowledge which is meant for our joy and enrichment through the whole of life.’ (p226)

‘Perhaps it is not wholesome or quite honest for a teacher to pose as a source of all knowledge and to give ‘lovely’ lessons. Such lessons are titillating for the moment, but they give children the minimum of mental labour, and the result is much the same as that left on older persons by the reading of a magazine. We find, on the other hand, that in working through a considerable book, which may take two or three years to master, the interest of boys and girls is well sustained to the end; they develop an intelligent curiosity as to causes and consequences, and are in fact educating themselves.’ (p227)

‘Labour prepares the way for assimilation, that mental process which converts information into knowledge; and the effort of taking in the sequence of thought of his author is worth to the boy a great deal of oral teaching.’ (p229)

Some educationalists ‘...feel it to be more important that a child should think than that he should know. My contention is rather that he cannot know without having thought; and also that he cannot think without an abundant, varied, and regular supply of the material of knowledge.’ (p241)

‘Plato’s Educational Aim: He desired not to assist in storing the passive mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the human soul were a mere repository or banqueting room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite its vegetating and germinating powers to produce new fruits of thought, new conceptions and imaginations and ideas.’ (p125)

2.5 Intelligence

‘... there seems reason to believe that the limit to human intelligence coincides with the limit to human interests; that is, that a normal person of poor and narrow intelligence is so because the interests proper to him have not been called into play.’ (p234)

‘Genius itself, we have been told, is an infinite capacity for taking pains; we would rather say, is the habit of taking infinite pains, for every child is born with the capacity.’ (p119)

‘To educate children for any immediate end—towards commercial or manufacturing aptitude, for example—is to put a premium upon general ignorance with a view to such special aptitude. The greater includes the less, but the less does not include the greater. Excellent work of whatever kind is produced by a person of character and intelligence, and we who teach cannot do better for the nation than to prepare such persons for its uses. He who has intelligent relations with life will produce good work.’ (p241)

3. Methods

3.1 Short Lessons

Short lessons are advocated to ensure that children develop the habit of full attention to all work. Allowing children to day dream is providing the environment for less than optimum performance and productivity, and limiting their potential development as a disciplined adult. Charlotte Mason felt that 20 minutes was long enough for a young child to attend to a single subject and that some mental break (in the form of a different style of work) would then allow them to refocus constructively. This has the practical value to a child that he knows that a disliked subject only continues for a known time!

3.2 Masterly Inactivity

Charlotte believed that we all need time for contemplation or internalising/digesting the information we have encountered and saw this as an integral component of the learning process. This time could be considered as ‘day-dreaming’ but should not be confused with inattention during lesson time. Charlotte Mason schools ran classes six days a week but only before lunch; the afternoons were for fresh air, sunshine, exercise, hobbies, and very importantly, observing and marvelling at the wonderful world God created.

‘The people who clamour for a Sunday that shall be as other days little know how healing to the jaded brain is the change of thought and occupation the seventh day brings with it.’ (p144))

3.3 Living Books

These books make the subject come alive to the reader. Many living books were read aloud in Charlotte Mason Schools to students of all ages, with an individual book possibly not being completed for several years.

These are rarely old-style textbooks, which generally present pre-packaged information in lesson-size parcels. They do not need to be expensive or famous books either—just the sort that evoke a ‘please another chapter’ reaction from the listener when read aloud.

Such books should be well written and use a rich vocabulary. This provides a subliminal literature lesson along with the subject matter of the book. She strongly disliked books written 'down' to children.

Charlotte Mason believed the teacher should not come between the author (or expert) and the student: let them ask questions, but the flow of the book should not be interrupted for a parental lecture!

'...the selection of the right book is the great function of the educator.' (p228)

'I know you may bring a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. What I complain of is that we do not bring our horse to the water. We give him miserable little text-books, mere compendiums of facts, which he is to learn off and say and produce at an examination; or we give him various knowledge in the form of warm diluents, prepared by his teacher with perhaps some grains of living thought to the gallon. And all the time we have books, books teeming with ideas fresh from the minds of thinkers upon every subject to which we can wish to introduce children.' (p171)

'...ideas must reach us directly from the mind of the thinker, and it is chiefly by means of the books they have written that we get into touch with the best minds.' (p177)

However, this doesn't mean encouraging our children to become book worms who disappear into an entertaining book at any opportunity:

'It is easy to get into the way of lounging in an arm-chair with a novel in the intervals between engagements which are, in fact, amusements. This sort of thing was a matter of conscience with an older generation; lethargic, self-indulgent intervals were not allowed.' (p106)

A range of books is now available to guide the selection of suitable reading material for different reading levels and interests. Once a child is reading fluently, these guides are extremely valuable to home-schooling parents looking for new books to read aloud or in selecting books for a child to read independently. Some such 'books about books' are detailed in Appendix 2.

3.4 Narration:

After reading or hearing a story once, the student tells back, or 'narrates', what they have learned in their own words. Older children can write their narrations. Charlotte Mason suggests that younger students could narrate verbally with a parent or older sibling acting as the scribe. She recommends that up to 8-10 year olds only narrate orally. Composition (that is, learning to identify and mimic specific writing styles) is left until a child is 14.

'On the whole, it is more useful to be able to speak than to write, and the man or woman who is able to do the former can generally do the latter.' (p88)

'The simplest way of dealing with a paragraph or a chapter is to require the child to narrate its contents after a single attentive reading—one reading, however slow, should be made a condition; for we are all too apt to make sure we shall have another opportunity of finding out 'what 'tis all about'. There is the weekly review if we fail too get a clear grasp of the news of the day; and, if we fail a second time, there is a monthly or quarterly review or an annual summing up... This is a bad habit to get into; and we should do well to save our children by not giving them the vague expectation of second and third and tenth opportunities to do that which should have been done at first.'

There is much difference between intelligent reading, which the pupil should do in silence, and a mere parrot-like cramming up of contents; and it is not a bad test of education to be able to give the points of a description, the sequence of a series of incidents, the links in a chain of argument, correctly, after a single careful reading.’ (p179-180)

Children learn to concentrate well when they need to narrate after a single reading. This process helps them retain what they have heard, helps the teacher check that they understand, and enriches their vocabulary and expression, as they tend to borrow words and phrases from the author in their retelling. These outcomes are similar to those intended from the traditional comprehension-style exercises, but allow the student to take in that which is most relevant from the reading and enables the teacher to use the very best literature to achieve these goals. Charlotte Mason also believed that narration is an excellent precursor to composition.

‘But this is only one way to use books: others are to enumerate the statements in a given paragraph or chapter; to analyse a chapter, to divide it into paragraphs under proper headings, to tabulate and classify series; to trace cause to consequence and consequence to cause; to discern character and perceive how character and circumstance interact; to get lessons of life and conduct, or the living knowledge which makes for science, out of books; all this is possible for school boys and girls, and until they have begun to use books for themselves in such ways, they can hardly be said to have begun their education.’ (p180)

Narration ideas are available at: www.home.earthlink.net/nbollard/narrationstarters.html

3.5 Copywork

Copywork simply involves carefully copying the words of great writers into a notebook (or binder) for each child. This operation requires careful attention to detail—every letter and punctuation mark should be faithfully transcribed—and, when being transferred to a book of favourite excerpts (the child can be given choice in selecting the passages), encourages high standards in penmanship. It teaches spelling, grammar and punctuation as well as writing style.

Charlotte Mason believed that a small amount of work done to a high standard was much more desirable than any amount of sloppy work – especially in handwriting. The habit of striving for excellence is being established during any written work, and tolerating untidiness was seen as condoning that standard.

Copywork may be taken from Bible verses, poems, stories, quotes—whatever takes your and your child’s fancy. Illustrations may be added to these pages if appropriate. William Bennett’s ‘The Book of Virtues’ is an excellent resource for copy work.

3.6 Dictation

Spelling and Dictation were considered to be subjects that we need to teach, rather than test. Dictation passages are often taken from previous copywork, reviewed by the child, then read slowly (once only, with punctuation and spelling help if necessary) for the child to write neatly. The idea here is that it is more instructive for the child to always encounter correct spelling, rather than waste time writing any words incorrectly. In Charlotte Mason schools, spelling mistakes were always corrected immediately—the more a child looked at incorrectly spelled word, the harder it would be to learn the correct spelling.

Coupled with a good phonics system, this approach allows children to master spelling without the usual drudgery. Unlike lists of spelling words, dictation encourages a child to think about spelling as he is writing sentences. Again, 'The Book of Virtues' contains an extensive range of prose and poetry that is ideal for Dictation.

3.7 Book of Centuries

This book records the facts (namely the dates, names and places) relevant to selected historical events after they have been encountered in the context of living books. The latter may not have been intended as 'history' lessons, however, any readings which are relevant to the sequence of history can be notated in the Book of Centuries.

This summary could be implemented in a loose-leaf binder, with dividers for each century, or computerised. It could be a single resource for the whole family and even started in pre-school years with Bible stories, or local or family history. Younger (and older) children could illustrate, rather than annotate, the key facts. It is also a good place to store narrations or outlines of historical events.

The Book of Centuries helps to place events in a chronological sequence and simplifies comparison of concurrent events in different locations. Some of the facts are the sort to commit to memory but are more meaningful after they have been 'fleshed out' by a living story.

3.8 Nature Study

This enjoyable activity develops keen observational skills and is an ideal introduction to science. Quite simply, nature study involves taking the time to go outside and look around long enough to notice things: the clouds, the birds, the trees, the flowers, the insects, and the changes that occur during each day and during the year. These observations can be recorded in pictures (good practise for artistic skills) or in writing, and embellished with additional information from textbooks, relevant prose or poetry, and photographs. Over time you and your children will start to learn the names and characteristics of the many 'objects' of nature around your homes.

'The children keep a dated record of what they see in their nature note-books, which are left to their own management and are not corrected. These note-books are a source of pride and joy, and are freely illustrated by drawings (brushwork) of twig, flower, insect, etc. The knowledge necessary for these records is not given in the way of teaching. On one afternoon in the week, the children go for a 'nature walk' with their teachers. They notice for themselves, and the teacher gives a name or other information as it is asked for, and it is surprising what a range of knowledge a child of nine or ten acquires. The teachers are careful not to make these nature walks an opportunity for scientific instruction, as we wish the children's attention to be given to observation with very little direction. In this way they lay up that store of 'common information' which Huxley considered should precede science teaching; and what is much more important, they learn to know and delight in natural objects as in the familiar faces of friends. The nature-walk should not be made the occasion to impart a sort of Tit-Bits miscellany of scientific information. The study of science should be pursued in an ordered sequence, which is not possible or desirable in a walk....

Geography, geology, the course of the sun, the behaviour of the clouds, weather signs, all that the 'open' has to offer, are made use of in these walks; but all is incidental, easy, and things are noticed as they occur.' (p237)

‘The child who learns his science from a text-book, though he go to Nature for illustrations, and he who gets his information from object-lessons, has no chance of forming relations with things as they are, because his kindly obtrusive teacher makes him believe that to know about things is the same thing as knowing them personally...’ (p66)

The ‘Handbook of Nature Study’ by Anna Botsford Comstock is the traditional Charlotte Mason text for Nature Study. It is a comprehensive set of lessons on the natural world, though compiled for the Northern Hemisphere. Karen Andreola’s ‘A Pocketful of Pinecones’ is a delightful story that offers insight into home schooling younger children with Nature Study.

Other authors whose writings on natural history should inspire budding naturalists are Jean Henri Fabré, Ernest Thompson Seton and Gerald Durrell.

3.9 Picture Study

This is an easy and enjoyable way to become acquainted with the works of many great artists. Basically an artist is selected each term (or some similar period) and a range of his or her works are chosen for study (as prints, book plates, or good (colour) photocopies). A ‘lesson’ may involve looking at a picture for 5 minutes, then turning it over and describing (verbally or in writing), or drawing, or painting it. Each picture may be studied over several weeks, by first describing, then drawing, then painting it, after several minutes of concentrated study. This process helps to develop observation skills and memory. Reading additional information about the painting and/or its artist can help to establish a context for the picture. You will be amazed how much you and your children start to notice about art styles, and learn about artists and their works.

‘The child who has been taught to see, appreciates pictures with discrimination.’ (p78)

‘The object of these lessons is that the pupils should learn how to appreciate rather than how to produce.’ (p239)

3.10 Disciplinary Subjects

As is obvious from the curricula and timetables available, Charlotte Mason schools also covered the standard ‘disciplinary subjects’ such as grammar and mathematics, as much for the discipline required to learn them as for their content.

‘Having cleared our minds as to the end we have in view, we ask ourselves—‘Is there any fruitful idea underlying this or that study that the children are engaged in?’ We divest ourselves of the notion that to develop the faculties is the chief thing, and a ‘subject’ which does not rise out of some great thought of life we usually reject as not nourishing, not fruitful; while we retain those studies which give exercise in habits of clear and orderly thinking. Mathematics, grammar, logic, etc., are not purely disciplinary, they do develop (if a bull may be allowed) intellectual muscle. We by no means reject the familiar staples of education in the school sense, but we prize them even more for the record of intellectual habits they leave in the brain tissue, than for their distinct value in developing certain ‘faculties’’. (p174)

4. Implementation

4.1 The Role of the Teacher

‘The teacher’s part is, in the first place, to see what is to be done, to look over the work of the day in advance and see what mental discipline, as well as what vital knowledge, this

and that lesson afford; and then to set such questions and such tasks as shall give full scope to his pupils' mental activity. Let marginal notes be freely made, as neatly and beautifully as may be, for books should be handled with reverence. Let numbers, letters, underlining be used to help the eye and to save the needless fag of writing abstracts. Let the pupil write for himself half a dozen questions which cover the passage studied; he need not write the answers if he be taught that the mind can know nothing but what it can produce in the form of an answer to a question put by the mind to itself.' (p181)

'The teacher's business is to indicate, stimulate, direct and constrain to the acquirement of knowledge, but by no means to be the fountain-head and source of all knowledge in his or her own person. The less parents and teachers talk-in and expound their rations of knowledge and thought to the children they are educating, the better for the children. Peptonised food for a healthy stomach does not tend to a vigorous digestion. Children must be allowed to ruminate, must be left alone with their thoughts. They will ask for help if they want it.' (p162)

'Our deadly error is to suppose that we are his showman to the universe; and, not only so, but that there is not community at all between child and universe unless such as we choose to set up.' (p188)

4.2 Making Education Relevant to Today

Education needs to be relevant to the time period in which the students live. For example, we no longer use slide rules or logarithmic tables for computations, so should our children have to learn how to use them?

This type of query could be applied to many topics, and such questions do not necessarily have hard and fast answers. It is tempting to discard useful, but tedious, skills without considering their real value. New trends should be followed cautiously, until a generation of 'guinea pigs' really prove their value. The current swing back to using phonics to teach spelling and reading follows a failed 'experiment' which undermined the education of a whole generation (or two) of students in this country.

However, neither do we need to slavishly use only those books that were available to teachers in the Charlotte Mason schools 100 years ago. There are now many better books (even some textbooks) available. Our language has also evolved so that 'old-fashioned' prose is likely to be much harder for young students to comprehend now. In applying the suggestions Charlotte Mason wrote over 80 years ago to a home school today, a combination of common sense and compromise is recommended.

There have been massive changes in lifestyle since Charlotte Mason's time. Children now have to cope with the 'burdens' of over-indulgence in leisure activities and the near total absence of real work. They are enticed to watch mindless television programs (educational or otherwise), play mindless computer games, acquire mindless toys and other collectables, and participate in too many mindless sporting and other 'fun' activities. Parents have to sift through hoards of 'educational stuff', much of which has very little real educational value, in order to select appropriate teaching material. We live at a faster (but less personally productive) pace than did our forebears a century ago. Adults and children alike now take less responsibility and, perhaps accordingly, enjoy less real security than those living a hundred years ago. I think it is a much more difficult environment in which to educate children properly.

‘What worked even fifty years ago will not work today, and what fulfils our needs today will not serve fifty years hence; there is no last word to be said upon education; it evolves with the evolution of the race.’

‘It is exciting to be a pioneer; but for the children’s sake, it may be well to constrain ourselves to follow those roads only by which we know that persons have arrived, or those newer roads which offer evident and assured means of progress towards a desired end. Self-will is not permitted to the educationalist; and he may not take up fads.’ (p245)

‘That system which shall be of use to practical people in giving purpose, unity and continuity to education, must satisfy the following demands:

It must be adequate, covering the whole nature of man and his relations with all that is other than himself:

It must be necessary, that is, no other equally adequate psychology should present itself; and

It must touch at all points the living thought of the age; that is, it must not be a by-issue to be discussed by specialists at their leisure, but the intelligent man in the street should feel its movement to be in step with the two or three great ideas by which the world is just now being educated.’ (p46)

4.3 Charlotte Mason Schools

‘In practise, however, we find that the use of books makes for short hours. No book-work or writing, no preparation or report, is done in the Parents’ Review School, except between the hours of 9 and 11:30 for the lowest class, to 9 and 1 for the highest, with half an hour’s interval for drill, etc.

From one to two hours, according to age and class, are given in the afternoons to handicrafts, field-work, drawing, etc; and the evenings are absolutely free, so that the children have leisure for hobbies, family reading, and the like. We are able to get through a greater variety of subjects, and through more work in each subject, in a shorter time than is usually allowed, because children taught in this way get the habit of close attention and are carried on by steady interest.’ (p240)

It is worth remembering that the children attending her schools in the first decades of last century walked to school six days a week, after completing numerous chores which were essential to their families’ livelihoods. They lived in a world that respected books and education. They had no televisions, no recorded music, no electricity, and no telephone, let alone computers and internet access. However, they attained standards of literacy (in English, French, German and Latin) which are rarely equalled by today’s indulged students; their achievements in drawing, general knowledge (history, Bible, art, literature, music), useful crafts, arithmetic and handwriting are sadly uncommon in our enlightened, modern world. And all this with no homework. Concentrated effort for a short period of time (with minimal resources) does seem to yield amazing results!

Examples of lessons and examination questions and answers are given in the Appendices to ‘School Education’ (Volume 3 in Charlotte Mason’s Original Home Schooling Series.)

4.4 Home Schools

Charlotte Mason, like many inspired educationalists (such as Montessori and Steiner), did not have children of her own. Her advice is well-considered, but sometimes lacks

awareness of the physical and mental ‘load’ that goes with the full-time responsibility of parents.

After trying several different approaches to Home Education (from ambitious to relaxed), I think the essential starting point is a realistic schedule to which all involved make a genuine commitment. Just as an ordered house has ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ so an ordered life has ‘a time for everything and everything at its time’.

When external events undermine your schedule (such as illness, accidents, phone calls, visitors) make wise allowance for the disturbance. This usually means omitting the affected item rather than trying to cram everything into the remaining time. However, if such disturbances are too frequent (or become habitual to omit that item), address the cause. This often means being more organised yourself and ensuring that your own commitment to Home Education is one of the primary commitments in your life. It is also worth questioning whether you are being too ambitious for yourself or your children. If in doubt, pray for guidance.

Further, as I am often reminded by a wise friend, Home Education is about being at home. A familiar routine in a familiar environment should be part of each child’s security. It is much easier to form habits of study within a regular daily rhythm in a regular setting.

Charlotte Mason suggests when a mother assumes responsibility for her children’s education she needs to seriously ask three questions:

*‘Why must the children learn at all?
What should they learn? And,
How should they learn it?’*

If she takes the trouble to find a definite and thoughtful answer to each of these queries, she will be in a position to direct her children’s studies; and will, at the same time, be surprised to find that three-fourths of the time and labour ordinarily spent by the child at his lessons is lost time and wasted energy.’

Each family may arrive at different answers to these questions for their own children. That is the benefit of home education. It is also a potential cost. It is the responsibility of each family to ensure that the choices they make are in the best interests of both their children and the society in which they live.

Given that few parents have themselves received a ‘good’ education, it is wise to follow quality curricula when starting home education, rather than ambitiously decide to try to ‘do it all yourself’. Charlotte Mason’s ideas can be incorporated into a diverse range of educational material, including textbooks and workbooks (which have traditionally been shunned by the Charlotte Mason purists). Some ‘Charlotte Mason’ style packaged curricula (such as Sonlight) are also available.

5. Recommended Reading

Charlotte Mason published a six-volume set of texts that provide copious detail of both the theory and implementation of her ideas. These are very ‘full-some’ books—truly dense on ideas and examples—but not light reading. Numerous other texts have been written to summarise her ideas and provide current suggestions for their implementation. Some of these books are listed below.

Most of these titles are available from Fountain Resources (08 8365 8921) and Home School Favourites (02 4575 3163).

Charlotte Mason (1925)

Original Home Schooling Series [ISBN 1-889209-00-7]

(These are also available on the web site:

www.freeyellow.com/members7/baty/page1.html)

Cindy Ruston

A Charlotte Mason Primer

Nature Study – The Easy Way

Language Arts – The Easy Way

Susan Schaeffer Macauley (1984)

For the Children's Sake [ISBN 0-89107-290-X]

For the Family's Sake [ISBN 1-58134-111-3]

Catherine Levison (2000/2001)

A Charlotte Mason Education [ISBN 1-891400-16-9]

More Charlotte Mason Education [ISBN 1-891400-17-7]

A Literary Education [ISBN 1-891400-23-1]

Karen Andreola

A Charlotte Mason Companion [ISBN 1-889209-02-3]

A Pocketful of Pinecones [ISBN 1-889209-03-1]

Penny Gardner (1997)

Charlotte Mason Study Guide.

Diane Lopez (1988)

Teaching Children. A curriculum guide to what children need to know at each level through sixth grade [ISBN 0-89107-489-9]

Clay and Sally Clarkson (1996)

Educating the Whole-hearted Child

Ruth Beechick (highly recommended)

A Strong Start in Language

An Easy Start in Arithmetic

A Home Start in Reading

You Can Teach Your Child Successfully [ISBN 0-940319-1-5]

Jenny King (1981)

Charlotte Mason Reviewed [ISBN 0-9538072-1-5]

Elizabeth Cooper (2004)

When Children Love to Learn [ISBN 1-58134-259-4]

'A Living Education' is an occasional newsletter published by Mary Collis with many thoughtful and useful articles about using Charlotte Mason ideas in Australian Home Schools. It is available from her company, Home School Favourites: www.homeschoolfavourites.com.au

Various web-sites now offer information and opinions about Charlotte Mason and her educational methods. (Others are listed in an attachment from Cindy Rushton's book.)

www.Christianity.com/Cmason

childlight.org/home.htm (CM books)

amblesideonline.homestead.com (offers sample curricula)

amblesideupperyears.homestead.com/index.html

www.homeschoolfavourites.com.au

ains.net.au/~bangalary/archive/002.htm

Appendix 1: Synopsis of Educational Theory for Charlotte Mason Schools

1. Children are born persons.
2. They are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and evil.
3. The principles of authority on the one hand and obedience on the other, are natural, necessary and fundamental; but –
4. These principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children, which must not be encroached upon, whether by fear or love, suggestion or influence, or undue play upon any one natural desire.
5. Therefore we are limited to three educational instruments – the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas.
6. By the saying, EDUCATION IS AN ATMOSPHERE, it is not meant that a child should be isolated in what may be called a ‘child environment’, especially adapted and prepared; but that we should take into account the educational value of his natural home atmosphere, both as regards persons and things, and should let him live freely among his proper conditions. It stultifies a child to bring down his world to the ‘child’s’ level.
7. By EDUCATION IS A DISCIPLINE, is meant the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structure to habitual lines of thought- i.e. to our habits.
8. In saying that EDUCATION IS A LIFE, the need of intellectual and moral as well as of physical sustenance is implied. The mind feeds on ideas, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum.
9. But the mind is not a receptacle into which ideas must be dropped, each idea adding to an ‘apperception mass’ of its like, the theory upon which the Herbartian doctrine of interest rests.
10. On the contrary, a child’s mind is no mere *sac* to hold ideas; but is rather, if the figure may be allowed a spiritual organism, with an appetite for all knowledge. This is its proper diet, with which it is prepared to deal, and which it can digest and assimilate as the body does foodstuffs.
11. This difference is not a verbal quibble. The Herbartian doctrine lays the stress of education – the preparation of knowledge in enticing morsels, presented in due order – upon the teacher. Children taught upon this principle are in danger of receiving much teaching with little knowledge; and the teacher’s axiom is ‘*What a child learns matters less than how he learns it*’
12. But, believing that the normal child has powers of mind that fit him to deal with all knowledge proper to him, we must give him a full and generous curriculum; taking care, only, that the knowledge offered to him is vital – that is, that facts are not presented without their informing ideas. Out of this conception comes the principle that,-
13. EDUCATION IS THE SCIENCE OF RELATIONS; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we must train him upon physical exercises, nature, handicrafts, science and art, and upon many living books; for we know that our business is, not to teach him all about anything, but to help him to

make valid as many as may be of 'Those first-born affinities, That fit our new existence to existing things'.

14. There are also two secrets of moral and intellectual self-management which should be offered to children; these we may call the Way of the Will and the Way of the Reason.
15. *The Way of the Will* - Children should be taught-
 - (a) To distinguish between 'I want' and 'I will'.
 - (b) That the way to will effectively is to turn our thoughts from that which we desire but do not will.
 - (c) That the best way to turn our thoughts is to think of or do some quite different thing, entertaining or interesting.
 - (d) That, after a little rest in this way, the will returns to its work with new vigour. (This adjunct of the will is familiar to us as *diversion*, whose office it is to ease us for a time from will effort, that we may 'will' again with added power. The use of suggestion – even self-suggestion - as an aid to the will, is to be deprecated, as tending to stultify and stereotype character. It would seem that spontaneity is a condition of development, and that human nature needs the discipline of failure as well as of success.)
16. *The Way of the Reason* – We should teach children, too, not to 'lean' (too confidently) 'unto their own understanding', because the function of reason is, to give logical demonstration (a) of mathematical truth; and (b) of an initial idea, accepted by the will. In the former case reason is, perhaps, an infallible guide, but in the second it is not always a safe one; for whether that initial idea be right or wrong, reason will confirm it by irrefragable proofs.
17. Therefore children should be taught, as they become mature enough to understand such teaching, that the chief responsibility which rests on them as persons is the acceptance or rejection of initial ideas. To help them in this choice we should give them principles of conduct and a wide range of the knowledge fitted for them. These three principles (15, 16 and 17) should save children from some of the loose thinking and heedless action which cause most of us to live at a lower level than we need.
18. We should allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and 'spiritual' life of children; but should teach them that the divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits, and is their continual helper in all the interests, duties and joys of life.

Appendix 2: Books about Books

Many of these titles can be found at second-hand book shops, or ordered from home education suppliers (such as Fountain Resources (08 8365 8921) or Home School Favourites (02 4575 3163)).

Honey for a Child's Heart by Gladys Hunt (ISBN 0-310-26381-6)

This is one of the best guides to children's books, including an 85-page indexed list of classics ordered by reading age. The Christian author deeply believes that a good book is "a gateway to a wider world of wonder, beauty, delight and adventure". She discusses many topics relevant to choosing good books and encouraging children to be avid, discerning readers.

Honey for a Woman's Heart by Gladys Hunt (ISBN 0-310-23846-3)

Gladys gives *you* reasons to read, tells you what makes a good book, and opens your eyes to what good books do for you, including a special section on the Bible.

Babies Need Books by Dorothy Butler (ISBN 0-14-010094-6)

The author believes that books should play a crucial role in children's lives right from the very first months. The book includes more than 200 titles, chaptered by age from birth to six years.

The Read-Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease (ISBN 0-14-009362-1)

Reading aloud awakens children's imaginations, improves their language skills, and opens new worlds of enjoyment and independence. This book annotates over 300 picture books, stories, novels, poems and anthologies that are especially suitable for reading aloud to children.

Books Children Love by Elizabeth Wilson (ISBN 0-89107-441-4)

A comprehensive guide to the very best children's books on a wide range of topics, including animals, art, Bible, Biography, craft, dance, drama, geography, history, handicaps, horticulture, humour, language, literature, mathematics, music, games, science and more! All annotated listings have age recommendations and embody the ideals of traditional values and a Christian worldview.

Let the Authors Speak by Carolyn Hatcher

This guide to about 1300 books is sorted by setting, that is the century and location of the story. There are reading and interest levels for children and adults for a range of literature covering ancient to modern times with cross-referencing by author and title.