CHARLOTTE MASON EDUCATION

By Barb

I have summarised some of the features of Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy that I felt have been of particular advantage to my family. Each Charlotte Mason devotee will undoubtedly view and implement her methods differently – as they suit each unique family and family member.

This summary was intended to answer the question 'What is Charlotte Mason Education about?' which I have heard asked at several meetings. It is difficult to give a short answer to that question. I hope this article offers enough detail to warrant further investigation if the approach sounds like it would suit your family.

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.

Some of her principles that I am particularly drawn to are:

1. 'Children are born persons': 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 that God has granted personalities and whom he loves as profoundly as any other human beings. Our task is to lead them to self-eduction: a 'liberal' (meaning generous) education.
2. 'Habit is worth ten characters': form good habits and an orderly life will follow. She suggests working on one habit at a time and avoid 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!
3. 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!
4. '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.
5. 'Nature Study': is my favourite Charlotte Mason subject. 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 text-books, 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 (see the book review on page 8). A CHEC activity in May will allow you to try Nature Study first hand!

6. 'Picture Study': 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.
7. Living Books are books that 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 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!
8. 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. Children learn to concentrate well when they need to narrate after a single reading and develop the habit of full attention thereafter.
   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.
9. Book of Centuries—summarises 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.

This summary 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.

10. Concrete Materials are essential to cement basic concepts before an abstract form is introduced. This is essential in the mathematical sciences. Using a hands-on approach may initially appear to be slower than workbooks, but ensures a solid foundation of understanding on which to build.
    There are many excellent games and activities (as well as real life) which can be used to build up an understanding of basic concepts in numeracy and arithmetic. These do not need to involve expensive educational resources either—bundles of paddle pop sticks grouped in tens, then hundreds will convey the idea of place value just as well as the popular MAB blocks (and maybe less ambiguously if they help count out the bundles).
    Only when a child really understands a concept with concrete materials are they ready to do those operations in abstract form. I believe this is an area I rushed with my son and it has cost us both dearly in time and patience. We still use workbook exercises but I now know the time taken to 'play' with materials is well worth the investment.
11. Copy work 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 punctation mark should be faithfully transcribed—and, when being transferred to a book of favourite excerpts (the child should be given choice in selecting the passages), encourages high standards in penmanship. 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.
    Copy work 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.
12. Spelling and Dictation were considered to be subjects that we need to teach, rather than test. Dictation passages are often taken from previous copy work, reviewed by the child, then read slowly (once only, with punctation 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.

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 numerous chores which were essential to their families' livelihoods. They lived in a world that respected books and education and 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!

Despite possible impressions given by various implementations 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'.

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.'*

Her approaches may not suit each home education situation, however I would encourage each family to assess the suitability of these methods for their own family rather than assume the opinion of some 'authority'. I have heard and read some dismissive comments about Charlotte Mason education which make me wonder whether the source of the comment had taken the time to investigate her methods before expounding their views.

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 some are supplied by Home School Favourites (02 4575 3163).

References:

Charlotte Mason (1925) [available from Fountain Resources]
Original Home Schooling Series [ISBN 1-889209-00-7]

Cindy Ruston [available from Home School Favourites]
A Charlotte Mason Primer
Nature Study – The Easy Way
Language Arts – The Easy Way

Susan Schaeffer Macauley (1984) [available from Fountain Resources]
For the Children's Sake [ISBN 0-89107-290-X]
For the Family's Sake [ISBN 1-58134-111-3]

Catherine Levison (2000/2001) [available from Fountain Resources]
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 (1998) [available from Fountain Resources]
A Charlotte Mason Companion [ISBN 1-889209-02-3]

Penny Gardner [available from Fountain Resources]
Charlotte Mason Study Guide.

Diane Lopez (1988) [available from Fountain Resources]
Teaching Children. A curriculum guide to what children need to know at each level through sixth grade [ISBN 0-89107-489-9]