



*"Education is an atmosphere, a life, a discipline" - Charlotte Mason*

The above quote belongs to a lady called Charlotte Mason, a British educator, who lived in the late 1800s and early 1900s. She invested her life in improving the quality of children's education.

*"Charlotte Mason was born in England in 1842 and was primarily educated by her parents at home. She became orphaned at sixteen, and decided at a young age to make education her life's work. What makes Charlotte Mason different from other educators of her time was her sincere love for children, and her concern for their on-going love of learning. Her methods provide a liberal (generous) education incorporating the humanities, fine arts and great literature." Extract from "Ambleside Online".*

She used the method of teaching children as a whole through a wide range of interesting living books (good literature), first-hand experiences, and good habits. Children would use living books rather than dry textbooks. Living books are usually written in story form by an author who has a passion for the subject. A living book makes the subject "come alive." She encouraged spending time outdoors, interacting with God's creation first-hand and learning the living ways of nature.

#### A child absorbs a lot from his home environment.

- **"Atmosphere"** it means the surroundings in which the child grows up. Atmosphere makes up one-third of a child's education. Someone loving needs to be home to make a home.
- **"Life,"** applies to academics. We should give children living thoughts and ideas, not just dry facts.
- **"Discipline"** means the habit of good discipline, specifically character. Cultivating good habits in your child's life makes up another third of his/her education.

Many home-schoolers have adopted her philosophy. Although I studied to become a teacher and taught for a few years and then trained parents and teachers for many years in a specific programme to prevent learning problems; I only got to learn about the Charlotte Mason way of learning as a home educator. I became intrigued by the educational philosophy of this woman and how profound and simple it is and that it cultivates such a love for learning in children. When I visited some schools in the UK a few years ago, I realised what a strong legacy this woman has left all over the world. It is possible for every child to have an enriched life of learning when a committed adult opens the door to this way of learning.

With the educational system at the brink of being changed in South Africa again, many a parent and teacher will be questioning once again whether children truly have learned or not. The introduction of the new curriculum 2012 called CAPS – Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements - will focus on prescribed material, prescribed textbooks and a prescribed schedule. The same book will be used in all public schools. Government hopes that schools will get their books which are to be distributed by the department, at the same time and from the same supplier. It seems that leaders in education hope to address the challenge by managing the system better and by controlling the material more by introducing similar textbooks.

I would like to introduce you to some of Charlotte Mason's philosophies which focus on good literature and narration, as these are so simple and do-able for any family. This is even more do-able when children visit their grandparents...

#### LIVING BOOKS

Undoubtedly the best identified of Mason's methods is her use of living books (good literature) for every subject possible instead of dry, factual textbooks or

books that are 'written down' to children. Rather than books written by a board, as most textbooks are, living books are usually written by one person with a passion for the topic and a broad appreciation of the language. Living books are penned by those with the ability to write in an engaging, literary style while communicating great ideas rather than mere facts. The size of the book is not as important as the content and style... it should be alive and engaging. *"If you want the mind of a child to come alive, feed him living ideas. In this way you put children directly in touch with the mind of the author, as living books are laced with emotion, saturated with ideas and convey information too."*

*"There are books and text-books,"* and the day is at hand when we shall all see that the latter are of no educational value. Writing in which no human feeling enters is not literature. So a report of pure scientific fact is not literature, a newspaper is a perfect example of this. Literature must bring truth, nobility and beauty. Charlotte Mason wrote that, *"A person is not built up from without but from within, and the more we do for a child the less he will do for himself."* If we give him watered-down material, many explanations, over-moralize, depend on the workbook to work the mind, what thinking is left for the child to do? How is his mind to grow from within if what we are doing is superficial?

When a person reads the right books and use the method of telling back (narration), he or she develops a taste for knowledge and comes to enjoy satisfying his or her curiosity. He becomes a thinker. He grows from within. It is not about the quantity of pages in a book but about the quality of the book itself.

## NARRATION

Another key component of Charlotte Mason's method is narration. In simple terms, narration is telling back in your own words what you just read or heard. It's a wonderful evaluation tool that requires much thinking and assimilating on the student's part. What a child can tell back has become his perception. Narration can be done in many ways. It can be done by speaking, writing, drawing, drama or building. Here are a few examples of narration:

- explain what this story tells you about the character of the person you read about,
- write a letter from one character to another,
- draw a map of the place you just read about,
- describe how you would adapt the scene to a movie,
- model something from the scene with clay,
- set up the scene you just read about with blocks, toys, Legos, etc.

Narrations can be oral, written or drawn and should be given after only one reading of the material. This method requires the child to intentionally train his powers of attention, to synthesise all he has read, to organise the material in his mind, and to determine how best to communicate all that he recalls in his own words. *"Corrections must not be made during the act of narration, nor must any interruption be allowed."* 📖

Books to read to find out more about a Charlotte Mason home school:

- *Educating the Wholehearted Child*, Clay and Sally Clarkson
- *A Charlotte Mason Companion*, Karen Andreola
- *For The Children's Sake*, Susan Schaeffer McCauley
- *A Charlotte Mason Study Guide*, Penny Gardner



Photograph: Annene Fourie

**Children are human beings and the style of writing that appeals to them is that which includes the human touch. Living books on a number of subjects add long-lasting value to any educational programme Children will gain a richer memory from what is taught in literary language. "Thought breeds thought; children familiar with great thoughts take as naturally to thinking for themselves as the well-nourished body takes to growing; and we must bear in mind that growth, physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, is the sole end of education."**

**- Charlotte Mason**



Dynamis is a ministry to support and inform families and home educators. The goal is to serve and equip parents to make the most of their learning experiences by focussing on the uniqueness of their children. Email Martie du Plessis at [martcham@vodamail.co.za](mailto:martcham@vodamail.co.za) or call 082 574 1433