



Educating in *Parables*

MARTIE DU PLESSIS of Dynamis and **GRANT FRANKE**, the principal of Hout Bay School, explain the importance of the education principles of Charlotte Mason.

Education is like a tree with many life giving branches. For a nation to truly give direction in education one must keep in mind the type of learners and their primary needs as persons. Jesus addresses this awareness of His disciples by following the method of close association, real life sharing and parables as internal visualization to His listeners. A headmaster of a Cape Town school phoned in after our November 2011 article to explain how they use narration as a philosophy in their school. Grant Franke from Hout Bay School writes: *"It was with much interest that I read the previous article in "Vision" entitled "Charlotte Mason" as I am presently a headmaster of maybe the only South African school, which bases and operates on the philosophy and principles of Charlotte Mason, a Christian educator in England at the turn of the previous century (1842-1923).*

Ten years ago the founders of what was then, *"Hout Bay Christian School"* stumbled upon the writings of Charlotte Mason. They, like many other Christian educationalists, believed that present models of Christian education lacked something of the freshness of Christ. They felt what I believe is best encapsulated in the following quote by G. Stronks and D. Blomberg, international Christian writers on education: *"Building design, teachers as technicians, scheduling, pre-packaged curriculums, the ringing of bells, assignments, grouping of students, accumulation of credits, testing / grading / ranking of students... all such practices assume that a product is being manufactured in some way. Mass production assumes similarity of treatment and conformity of outcome; it hardly provides the best model for the unwrapping of gifts, the sharing of burdens, or the seeking of shalom... Christian schooling too often looks exactly like its public school counterpart: fragmented, superficial, and deeply opposing to Christian beliefs and purposes."* (Stronks, G. G., & Blomberg, D. 1993)"

They found Charlotte Mason's outlooks and writings to be an incredibly refreshing and common-sense philosophy on the application of Christ's example and teaching on how children should be educated and treated. Only too often had they felt like the authors of the above quote, that Christian education was merely *"a thin layer of icing"* over what was essentially a secular model. Changing a school's modus operandi is never an easy task and the staff of Hout Bay Christian School found it all the more difficult as they felt very alone in their quest. Previously the only area where one could find Charlotte Mason's methods in South Africa was in home education, a whole school was a first!

Four years ago it was with much relief that the school officially became part of Ambleside International. This is a chain of schools founded in America which helps set curriculum, as well as direct and manage Charlotte Mason based schools. The experience and guidance of our American friends has helped the school truly find its feet. Socially the school has a strong family feel and academically the children enjoy the diverse and rich curriculum. Furthermore the students have fared well whenever they've been externally tested, proving that Charlotte Mason's methods are not just alternative but also effective in teaching the disciplines of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Recently a headmistress of one of Cape Town's most prominent private schools gave us a visit. She was taken on a tour of the classrooms whilst they were in session. Her feedback afterwards was interesting. She shared how she was impressed at the student's high level of concentration and at the sense of peace and quietness around the school. My response was that her positive observations could be ascribed to two tangibles and one rather intangible. The first of the tangibles was that the primary goal of our school is that children would enjoy learning. Thus the content of the carefully chosen books holds

their attention as they generally want to hear more, so are less inclined to distracting behaviour. Secondly their powers of concentration relate strongly to the practice of narration, key methodology for the teaching of the curriculum. This is based on Miss Mason's philosophy that the mind best retains when it has to answer a question. For example a boy is told to brush his teeth regularly in order to avoid bad teeth. The retention of this fact will be far better when he has posed himself the question "What can I do to avoid bad teeth?" This is not the same as the "right or wrong questionnaire" frowned upon by Miss Mason, but rather entails a teacher reading a text to his/her class than simply asking the question "What have I read?" The children are then encouraged to narrate back what has just been read. Some do it verbatim whilst others use their own language but demonstrate that they have heard the essence of the text. (This method is presently known as "retrieval" and is being experimented with by NSF (National Science Foundation) in the USA; refer to a quote from their research below.

"In two studies, reported by Karpicke and his colleague, Purdue University psychology student Janell Blunt, a total of 200 students studied texts on topics from different science disciplines. One group engaged in elaborate study using concept maps while a second group practiced retrieval; they read the texts, then put them away and practiced freely recalling concepts from the text. After an initial study period, both groups recalled about the same amount of information. But when the students returned to the lab a week later to assess their long-term learning, the group that studied by practicing retrieval showed a 50 per cent improvement in long-term retention above the group that studied by creating concept maps." (Karpicke.J. and Blunt.J. (2011))"

Of the numerous methods one gains from applying this philosophy, the art of narration stands out as one of the simplest yet profound in its effect on children's powers of concentration. I'd like to share with you a more personal reason as to my appeal for Charlotte Mason in Christian schooling. For six years my wife and I taught in schools in the deep tribal areas of Mozambique. We both learnt Portuguese and taught our students to do the same. We included prayer and Bible reading in our teaching but also strictly followed the state curriculum. We enjoyed many aspects of our work yet two insightful African writers summed up some of my deeper fears.

"The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (Ngugi Wa Thiong 2006)

Subconsciously we had been part of a system that was implying that to be "learned" you had to forsake your culture. The resulting pressures and tensions made for a very limited and shallow opportunity to truly share the Gospel of Jesus. Ebousi Bolouga, an African theologian describes this phenomenon well:

"In Africa the gospel is like a loaf of freshly baked bread yet often the missionaries bring it wrapped in a plastic bag" (F.E. Bolouga 2002)



In a nutshell, we were unwittingly removing children from their villages by introducing to them to a system which weakened their strong concepts of family and community. In SA I believe this same danger exists, in modern schooling the unhealthy levels of stress and competition cause children to learn values and lifestyle that doesn't enrich but strain family and community. In effect the language of home and that of school are very different. Charlotte Mason based Christian schooling has been in our experience, the most effective philosophy in maintaining strong family and community based schools. Where Faith in Christ is a very normal and natural reality. I find my work to be uniquely challenging as daily there is a call to deeply rethink what I believe Jesus means education to be.

"And be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."(Romans 12:2)

After listening to this excited headmaster and reading his article on our November 2011 article of Charlotte Mason, as a philosophy practised in their school, I became aware of the fact that we can only truly change and influence people if we follow the model of Jesus. He wished us to humbly serve and not

lord it over people and children from a position above them. Leadership is safe only in the hands of those who, in humility, display a servant heart to bring out the best in learners. Jesus devised a mentorship program with His disciples, which was informal and oral. He turned everyday life experiences into one big classroom. Through Him we see that dialogues, questions and answers, parables and proverbs are used by the Master Teacher and the oral application in education cannot be underestimated. ▣

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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 or call 082 574 1433