Teaching Less while Your Child Learns More

An Introduction to Charlotte Mason Education for the Home Educator

Sheila Carroll

Living Books Curriculum
Teaching Less While Your Child Learns More: An introduction to Charlotte Mason education for the home educator

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Dear Home Educator,

Welcome to the beginning of a wonderful adventure of home educating using Charlotte Mason’s methods, way for your child to learn and to love to learn. Contained in these pages is a compilation of articles, essays and helps—many of them to be found on our website. We have put them all in one place to help get you started.

A friend of mine who is a homeschooling mother of six and uses Charlotte Mason’s methods said once, “I am very fortunate. My children’s teachers are Socrates, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Theodore Roosevelt, Emily Dickenson and many, many others.”

My friend was describing the essence of a Charlotte Mason education---the teaching parent brings the best books to their child, whose sole duty is to take up and use the knowledge within their pages.

This book is meant as a first-step to show you how your child can use living books as means of self-education. I encourage you to spend time learning more about Charlotte Mason education by visiting our website, reading Miss Mason’s books, and above all using the methods described.

Living Books Curriculum provides a complete Charlotte Mason curriculum. All the helps and organization you need are right in our manual. Be sure to check out our website and learn More about Living Books Curriculum.

This book can be printed out and read, or it can be read on your computer. The advantage of reading from your computer screen is that there are many links to click on that help you move around the document.

Prayerfully consider trying this wonderful way to educate your children.

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Chapter 1: What is a Charlotte Mason Education?

Who is Charlotte Mason?

What Charlotte Mason’s educational philosophy?

How can I apply this philosophy to my homeschool?

Who is Charlotte Mason?

Charlotte Mason (1842-1923) was a British reformer and pioneer in the field of education. Her concept of living books as a foundation for educating children shaped many of the schools of Great Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. She founded the Parent’s National Education Union in 1887 and in 1892 established the “House of Education”, a teacher training college in Ambleside. There were schools, individuals, and parents who adopted her principles of education.

Besides the legacy of the students themselves, she left behind a six-volume set of books covering all aspects of her educational ideas. It also covers pertinent issues of moral, intellectual and physical development. Her biography, The Story of Charlotte Mason has been reissued (Child Light, Ltd., 2000). She, herself, did not want a biography, “I do not wish my life to be written, it is the work that matters; it will live.”

Miss Mason believed children’s minds are no different than their bodies; both require a highly nutritious, varied diet. The proper diet of the mind, she felt, is ideas; the best and the greatest ideas from the finest literature. Hence, the concept of “living books”: books of high quality, by one author (as opposed to textbooks written by committee) read in great quantity. Miss Mason also taught that children learn best from experiencing subjects with their senses rather than reading about them. For example, nature walks to see a certain flower were preferred over classroom discussions about that flower.

Miss Mason’s early training was at a time when educators were just beginning to recognize each child was an individual with worth and value. Her contemporaries were
such leading lights as writer and poet William Coleridge, social reformer John Ruskin, and educational reformer Maria Montessori.

Through those early years of training she was forming her own unique ideas. After a long apprenticeship learning from and observing children, Miss Mason began to lecture. She found an immediate audience for her ideas. From the 1870s onward, she worked tirelessly to inspire others to use her ideas. In 1887, encouraged by the reception to the publication Home Education, she set about to make a “ground plan of education—a common possession”. As a result, schools were formed devoted to her principles. Teachers, trained at the “House of Education”, then went into employment in homes and public schools.

Ultimately, her influence became worldwide as the Parent’s Union developed curriculum for British and American families around the globe. Though her methods were widely assimilated both in Britain and in the United States (e.g., the whole language movement of recent years is an echo of her work) the Christian principles on which they were founded were left behind. Her many books and methods of teacher training were forgotten primarily because they were openly Christian in viewpoint. By the mid-twentieth century, education had become increasingly secular, and her extraordinarily effective methods of education began to be overlooked in favor of more “progressive” forms. By the 1960s, some Charlotte Mason schools could still be found in England.

In 1984 Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, in her book For the Children’s Sake (Crossway Books), introduced readers to Miss Mason’s ideas on educating the whole child—body, soul and spirit—as well as Mason’s ideas on character development. The homeschooling movement was then gaining momentum, and Miss Mason’s ideas were welcomed. Karen and Dean Andreola were made aware of the Mason methods while living in England. Thanks to them, the entire six-volume set of Mason’s work, The Original Home Schooling Series, has been reissued (Tyndale House, 1989). Since that time, appreciation for Miss Mason’s work has steadily gained momentum in the United States. There are a number of elementary schools using the Charlotte Mason method and thousands of parents homeschooling their children using her ideas.
What is Charlotte Mason’s educational philosophy?

The following twenty principles were developed by Miss Mason and appear in preface to A Philosophy of Education.

1. Children are born persons.

2. They are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and for evil.

3. The principles of authority on the one hand and of 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 the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by 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. The P.N.E.U. Motto is: "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life."

6. When we say that "education is an atmosphere," we do not mean 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," we mean the discipline of habits, formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structures 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. We hold that the 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.

10. Such a doctrine as e.g. the Herbartian, that the mind is a receptacle, lays the stress of education (the preparation of knowledge in enticing morsels duly ordered) upon the teacher.
Children taught on 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.'

11. But we, believing that the normal child has powers of mind which fit him to deal with all knowledge proper to him, give him a full and generous curriculum; taking care only that all knowledge offered him is vital, that is, that facts are not presented without their informing ideas. Out of this conception comes our principle that,—

12. "Education is the Science of Relations"; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, 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.

13. In devising a SYLLABUS for a normal child, of whatever social class, three points must be considered:

   (a) He requires much knowledge, for the mind needs sufficient food as much as does the body.

   (b) The knowledge should be various, for sameness in mental diet does not create appetite (i.e., curiosity)

   (c) Knowledge should be communicated in well-chosen language, because his attention responds naturally to what is conveyed in literary form.

14. As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced, children should 'tell back' after a single reading or hearing: or should write on some part of what they have read.

15. A single reading is insisted on, because children have naturally great power of attention; but this force is dissipated by the re-reading of passages, and also, by questioning, summarising, and the like.

Acting upon these and some other points in the behaviour of mind, we find that the educability of children is enormously greater than has hitherto been supposed, and is but little dependent on such circumstances as heredity and environment.
Nor is the accuracy of this statement limited to clever children or to children of the educated classes: thousands of children in Elementary Schools respond freely to this method, which is based on the behaviour of mind.

16. There are two guides to moral and intellectual self-management to offer to children, which we may call 'the way of the will' and 'the way of the reason.'

17. 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 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.)

18. The way of reason: We teach children, too, not to 'lean (too confidently) to their own understanding'; because the function of reason is to give logical demonstration (a) of mathematical truth, (b) of an initial idea, accepted by the will. In the former case, reason is, practically, an infallible guide, but in the latter, it is not always a safe one; for, whether that idea be right or wrong, reason will confirm it by irrefragable proofs.

19. 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 ideas. To help them in this choice we give them principles of conduct, and a wide range of the knowledge fitted to them. These principles 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.

20. We allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and 'spiritual' life of children, but 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.
How can I apply this philosophy to my homeschool?

The Charlotte Mason method (CM) can be used by anyone, no matter how many children you have.

By applying the basic principles of Charlotte Mason’s method, you can accomplish more in a few hours of homeschooling than all day with another method, even with several children.

To accomplish this you choose living books (See Tool 2) according to subject; create a schedule that meets the needs of you and your children and consistently apply the methods. Result? Your children will fall in love with learning all over again.

Apply the principles consistently

Familiarize yourself with the basic ideas of a Charlotte Mason education. When you do, you will say, this is the education I wanted for myself! LBC expresses Charlotte Mason’s philosophy with our Seven Keys and Six Tools of learning. We also offer articles and helpful links, as well as Charlotte Mason’s twenty basic principles.

How to combine subjects with multiple children

Penny Gardner, a mother of seven, author of A Charlotte Mason Study Guide and Italics: Beautiful Handwriting for Children offers this advice regarding how to combine subjects with a range of children:

Subjects such as history, art appreciation, science, literature, nature study, and anything else that mom is reading aloud can be combined with two or more students. They may take turns narrating those topics. I have done this with three students who were between first and sixth grade. Older students (5-6th grades) may write some of their narrations independently, while mom listens to the younger ones.

Subjects such as math, beginning reading instruction for the first grader (while the older child reads independently), and perhaps handwriting, including copywork and dictation, may need to be worked on with each child individually.
Chapter 2: Six Tools of a Charlotte Mason Education

**Tool 1: Narration**

Narrating is an art, like poetry-making or painting, because it is there in every child’s mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the process of disciplinary education.

_Home Education, p. 231_

Most children enjoy telling you what they know about a subject. It delights them to tell about an incident, however small it may seem to us. Charlotte Mason believed that this love of telling could be used as a foundation for self-education. **Narration is retelling in one’s own words what has just been read (either aloud or silently). It is a natural way to demonstrate and organize what one has learned from the reading. Charlotte Mason’s idea of narration as a tool for education and assessment was far broader in intent than mere “parroting back” of information.** It involves really knowing the thing that has been read. In order for narration to be an effective form of self-education, children must be read aloud to from the very first with the best literature available.

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- Narration gives:
  - Beauty of expression
  - Recall of material
  - Increased mental facility
Contained within great books is nourishment for the child’s mind in the form of ideas. As Charlotte Mason has said before just as the child’s body needs nourishment to grow, so too the child’s mind needs nourishment in the form of ideas in order to grow. Narration provides an effective way for those ideas to be made specifically the child’s own.

**When to begin narration**

The best time to begin is when the child is about six years old. If your child is younger than six and is narrating spontaneously, listen intently and with interest. Show your approval with smiles and nods, but don’t require it of the child. After age six, or when you begin formal schooling, start with simple stories of high quality. Aesop’s Fables is the best literature to use. They contain a minimum of characters (usually only two) and a minimum of action (usually only 2-3 events).

When you are ready, sit with the child (this also works with more than one child) and say gently with a smile, “I am going to read (give the title) one time to you. I want you to listen carefully. Then tell me in your own words all you remember of the story.” After you have read the story, pause a moment to let the story settle in, then say, “Tell me all you remember about the story.” At this point, listen without comment until the child is done. If there is more than one child, you can let one start and the other add. Or, alternately, you can have the first child narrate and then ask the second (or third), “Is there anything you would like to add?”

Taking turns narrating while others listen builds the habit of attention in children.

As the child matures, you should be adding increasingly complex material. The progression should be from short paragraph to brief passage, single page to gradually several pages. By the time children are in later elementary they should be able to narrate several pages with ease.

✎ To read a more detailed explanation of narration, see the article [Telling Back: The Art of Narration](https://www.charlottemasonhomeschooling.com).
Tool 2: Living Books

Children have a right to the best we possess; therefore their lesson books should be, as far as possible, our best books. A Philosophy of Education, p. 235

We call classic those books that have endured and made a contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human. They have shaped our view of the world and ourselves. They are the great books of world civilization. In many cases, we have these great books only because wise individuals have preserved them for us. They have survived war, politics, famine and fire. The range and scope of this literature is staggering. Literature encompasses six-thousand years of human history. There is no subject of human nature that these books have not touched upon.

Great literature can range from the profoundly simple fables of Aesop to the complex novels of Leo Tolstoy; from the dialogs of Plato to the Declaration of Independence. E. D. Hirsch, author of The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), says of the classics that they are “the repository for our highest shared ideals—in its riches, those who seek answers to the great questions, will find answers.”

Why is it important to encourage children to love good books? It is important because they are good. If we expect children to grow into the fullest extent of their powers, we must give them the best we have. Charlotte Mason called well-written books by one author with a passion for his subject, “living books”. They are living because the ideas contained in them have the capacity to grow and transform in the mind, just as a seed can germinate and grow in the ground. By reading great literature, children enter into a common understanding of what it means to be human. Without this body of literature they remain limited in their knowledge to only what is within their immediate surroundings. Great literature illustrates the basic principles of life and shows how one’s own culture fits into a larger scheme.

What is a living book?

While not every book your child reads will be a classic which will endure for centuries, there are multitudes of living books which fill the definition set down by Miss Mason.
Charlotte Mason said a living book is one that is “well put” and “well told” (*Parents and Children*, p. 263).

In other words, a living book:

> Powerfully and beautifully expresses the ideas of its author

The narrative—whether fiction or non-fiction—holds together in a compelling and memorable way.

**Another way to think of living books**

When children grow up hearing the best ideas put forth in the best possible language, they model their thinking and their writing after these. Charlotte Mason felt that a parent or teacher’s chief duty was to provide living ideas as food for the child’s mind. If we give our children “dumbed down” books or books in which the information is in bits and pieces across the page, then the ideas are no longer living but dry-as-dust facts. Living ideas are primarily found in living books, books that are “well put and well told.”

☞ How will you know it’s living when you read it? Apply “the test.” Read a few pages to your children, then stop. If they ask for more, you know you have a winner.

**Tool 3: Orality**

Note: While Charlotte Mason did not write on the topic of orality, her teachings are full of the implications of a curriculum rich in oral language experiences. The wide variety can be seen in her recommendations for narration, recitation, discourse, reading aloud, and oral exams. I include this discussion on orality in the expectation that it is consistent with the goals and vision of a living books education.

Literacy is the ability to read and write; orality is the ability to speak and listen. All four modes—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—make up human communication. In language arts instruction the emphasis is usually on literacy—reading and writing. This is unfortunate because orality is an equally necessary competency. In fact, without it a child cannot learn to read or write well. Orality must precede literacy. The first language skill a child learns is to listen, then to speak and only much later to read and
still later to write. A very young child is preliterate and has what is called a complete primary orality. That is, the child experiences the world by seeing, touching and hearing.

In that time before formal instruction, the child and parent engage in “baby talk” that includes rhythms, rhymes, and most of all stories. Through these oral experiences the infant or toddler learns patterns of language. Gradually the child understands the world through hearing and imitating sounds. In other words, the meaning of words is associated with the sound.

Children come to school age fully able to speak and listen. Yet this essential ability is often overlooked in favor of silent attention and print recognition. The Living Books Curriculum uses orality extensively to promote literacy and foster learning. The curriculum has been structured so that orality is exercised at every opportunity.

**Storytelling — the highest form of orality**

A story —

*One day naked truth went walking. Everywhere she went people scorned her for her nakedness and would not hear her words. Finally, imagination saw her difficulty and offered to accompany naked truth whenever she journeyed. When people saw how beautiful imagination was, they desired her and welcomed her words. Naked truth, of course, was welcomed everywhere imagination went.* ~Adapted from a folktale

Imagination in the form of story is the beautiful companion of truth. Wherever people welcome stories, they welcome truth as well. Story is a gentle teacher; yet it has power to teach us both the way of the heart, which is compassion, and the way of the mind, which is wisdom and knowledge. Since earliest times, stories have been used to teach. Bidpai, the Indian sage, used fables to teach the sons of the kings how to rule with skill and wisdom. The Orthodox Jews used story to reflect the eternal truths found in the Torah. In Africa, even today, problem-solving stories are given to children from a very early age to encourage a discerning mind.

Every culture has its own use of story and storytelling. Storytelling communicates living ideas just as written words do. Think of the Bible stories and the truths they
communicate. Remember the story of Moses, or Joseph? Both of these men’s lives make an engaging story and yet contain the eternal truths of the eternal God. One important feature of storytelling is its ability to improve creative and predictive thinking in children. It improves creative thinking because the story, when vividly imaged by the listener, exercises the mind. This ability to image is an essential ingredient in all creating. Through listening and working with story, the child develops a rich palette of images stored in the mind from which he can invent. Albert Einstein, one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Tool 4: Nature Study

*Stand still and consider the wondrous works of God.* Job, 37:14

*If we give children regular opportunities to get in touch with God’s creation, a habit is formed that will be a source of delight throughout their lives. Many people know little of the natural world because they never take time to observe it. Once our senses are on the alert, though, nature yields treasure after treasure.* A Charlotte Mason Companion

The wonders of nature wait at your doorstep. Even if you live in a busy, crowded city, there are birds, insects, and plants to be found. Finding them is fully half the fun. When you make exploring and appreciating the natural world a priority, it will transform your homeschool. Natural wonders are everywhere. They are as simple as watching the way clouds change and form to as complex as a fruit tree or a range of mountains. God made it so.

We enjoy nature because we recognize the Creator in His creation. Even our bodies are made up of the same minerals as plants, animals and soil.

Learning to appreciate and be keenly aware of nature is one habit that yields riches for a lifetime.

Some may see time in the out-of-doors during school hours as mere play and not serious academic work. Nothing could be further from the truth. Taking children outside to observe nature and all its marvelous processes is to teach them a great deal that cannot be found in books. For example, measuring the angle of the sun or the
length of shadows as the day proceeds is the scientific process in action. Or, identifying the name of a bird and learning something of its habits and diet is ornithology and ecology. These are only two examples. There are not books enough to contain all that is in nature, and one lifetime is not enough to study it all.

Each school day should have time in the out-of-doors. At least once a week there should be a nature walk, even if it is only in the yard. These guided times when the teaching parent and child explore together are key to training the powers of observation. Later, the child can take up his nature notebooks

**Tool 5: Short Lessons**

*Children no more come into the world without provision for dealing with knowledge than without provision for dealing with food. They bring with them not only that intellectual appetite, the desire for knowledge, but also an enormous, an unlimited potential for attention to which the power of memory seems attached.* A Philosophy of Education, p. 76

Children are persons born with a desire to learn—to acquire knowledge in a wide variety of subjects. They are also born with an enormous capacity for attention and remembering. These two statements may seem to run counter to experience in the classroom. We have all seen children as inattentive as magpies. We have also seen their distaste for certain subjects expressed in inattention. How does the teaching parent harness that desire for knowledge together with the capacity for attention?

The answer lies in the length of the lessons themselves. Charlotte Mason recommended lessons be no more than ten minutes in length for a child under the age of eight (*Home Education*, p. 142). When the lessons are short and varied, your child’s interest is always fresh and ready for what comes next.

After the age of eight, the lesson can be lengthened to twenty and even thirty minutes for children who are ten years or more. However, care should be taken that if a child is appearing idle or not accomplishing the work with full attention, the work should be changed to something as unlike it as possible.

Then, when the child is brought to renewed attention, it is the teaching parent’s responsibility to bring the child back to the unfinished work. If he is still having
difficulty, then it may be that the child has not understood some part of the instruction. It may be necessary to go back and re-introduce the subject. It is also helpful for children to understand what is expected in terms of time use in the school day. Posting a schedule helps them, and you, stay on track.

Using short lessons is more than mere technique; Charlotte Mason calls this approach a “root principle”. By using short lessons the child is permitted to bring the full power of his attention to bear on a subject. Doing on his own what is usually coerced or persuaded, brings about inner strength of purpose:

To make yourself attend, to make yourself know, this indeed is to come into a kingdom, all the more satisfying to children because they are so made so that they revel in knowledge.

A Philosophy of Education, p. 77

**Tool 6: Local Resources**

A Living Books education makes use of all that lays within reach—the library, home, friends, family, and community. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century in America, it was accepted that learning was in relationship to the people, places and events at hand.

Today we must make an effort to discover what our resources are. It requires rethinking relationships with family and friends, realizing that the local library is a great deal more than a repository of books, and seeking out the artisans, scientists, skilled craftsmen and women in our area. All these resources are usually readily available and usually free of cost. They require only our time and interest.

**Public Library**

Plan regular trips to the library. If your library allows young children to have a lender’s card, procure one for your child. Scour the shelves in the juvenile literature section. Whatever topic is coming up next week, see what your library has to say on this topic. If you don’t find what you need, use interlibrary loan services. Most libraries now have their catalogue online. You can research at home, and even request that books be put on hold. Often libraries have educational programs. Be a regular user of their offerings.
The librarian is trained to be a resource. Often, the librarian can answer questions about homeschooling in your community. The librarian can point you toward materials you may not even be aware of, or, help you research online for more information on a topic. Libraries are also sources of high-quality videos, audio cassettes (books on tape) and CDs.

**Your Home**

See your home as a resource. Your little ones should not be restricted to the playroom, or forbidden to make “messes” in the kitchen. Within reason your children should see the home as their learning laboratory. The kitchen is a major resource, and your child should regularly learn to use it to cook in (home economics), play with water in the sink (science), use the measuring spoons and cups (math), do menu planning (thinking skills) and on and on.

As to the rest of your home, when you go about your chores, involve your child as much as is possible. At first this will slow your work considerably, but as time goes by the child will gain great skill in simple chores.

You will have an ally in housework rather than an enemy of orderliness. When there is some repair work to do, let the child observe your process of problem solving. If there are decisions about the cost of new versus repair the old, let your child hear this discussion. Another idea is to let your child have the use of real tools and equipment. Let them ride the tractor or the riding lawn mower, with your supervision. Or make up a small tool kit with real tools (girls should have one, too!). A trip to the hardware store to purchase the tools is another learning experience. Shopping, too, should be a time for math (price comparison, grocery totals), reading (labels, advertising), and social studies (kinds of people).

**Friends and Family**

Once you begin to see your home as a resource, it is a short leap to seeing friends and family in the same light. Every one of your family members or your friends is gifted with talents and abilities. Each one has some passion to share. In early American times it was common to “apprentice” children to learn a trade. Today we need to create these
opportunities. Make a list of the skills and abilities family members and friends have, and then make a plan to incorporate them into your homeschool.

**Your Community**

The place where you live is a multi-layered, patchwork quilt of people, places and things. Sorting out what will add to your homeschool takes many years. If you are just beginning, there are the obvious resources for field trips, like the fire station and the hospital. As you gain a deeper understanding of your community you will come to realize that an amazing number of people exist who are just waiting to be asked to share what they know. A helpful resource is *A to Z Guide to Homeschool Field Trips* edited by Gregg Harris (Noble Publishing Assoc. <www.noblebookstore.com/store/index.php>).
Chapter 3: Academic Subjects in a Charlotte Mason Curriculum

Disciplinary subjects vs. inspirational subjects

Correlated Studies

Overview of subjects in a CM curriculum

"Education is the Science of Relations"; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, 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.

Charlotte Mason’s Twenty Principles

Disciplinary Subjects vs. Inspirational Subjects

Charlotte Mason recommended, and rightly, that a child’s interest and attention are best kept when studies are alternated between disciplinary (skill-based) and inspirational (content-based). So, for example, following math, a skill-based subject, a reading from a history book would be welcome and refreshing.

Dr. Jack Beckman, Professor of Education at Covenant College in South Carolina and a Charlotte Mason scholar reminds us that, “Inspirational subjects touch heart and mind and are reflective of things such as art, music, literature, history, etc. Disciplinary subjects are those in which teacher-student interactions are necessary as students are unable to apprehend their concepts, content, and/or skills alone – mathematics, languages, handwriting, certain aspects of science, etc.”

The PNEU schools had a wide curriculum for all students, offering modes of disciplinary (skill-based) instruction as well as inspirational (content-based) instruction.
These two forms of instruction were not exclusive of one another, for each discipline should be infused with inspiration, and each inspiration requires its consequent discipline. These modes were used in harmony with one another to enliven the means of how a child gets knowledge, thereby providing a balance of effort and rest in a rigorous curriculum.


**Correlated Studies**

Charlotte Mason taught that correlated studies enabled greater exploration of ideas but ought not to result in “busy work” (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 114, ff). To correlate means to bring one thing into a complementary relation with another. To correlate studies means to bring one subject, such as history or science, into a complementary relationship with other subjects, such as art or nature study. Living Books Curriculum correlates most of their subjects. So, for example, the dictation for the week is taken from the history readings. Poems and the art for Picture Study are correlated to the era of history—Civil War poetry and Leonardo daVinci’s paintings are studied at the same time as a student is studying the Civil War and the Renaissance respectively.
Overview of subjects in a CM curriculum

While Charlotte Mason recommended all of the subjects indicated below, contemporary terminology of the areas of studies is used. Language Arts, for example, is not a term that Miss Mason would have used, yet, the areas under that term are all as used in her schools.

Living Books Curriculum has the following eleven core areas of study. To help you visualize the content taught during each grade level, Living Books Curriculum created a scope and sequence for each area of study. Living Books Curriculum’s scope and sequence denotes a particular subject’s content (the scope) and the order in which the material is presented (the sequence) within the curriculum. To view a scope and sequence, simply click on the subject title.

Bible Study

The purpose of Bible study in a CM curriculum is to provide students with an introductory knowledge of the Old and New Testaments and an understanding of God’s work in the life of the Jewish nation through the stories of the principle people involved. The children show their understanding of this study by memorization, narration, and storytelling.

Children should know the Bible Text.—Children between the ages of six and nine should get a considerable knowledge of the Bible text. By nine they should have read the simple (and suitable) narrative portions of the Old Testament, and, say, two of the gospels. The Old Testament should, for various reasons, be read to the children. The gospel stories they might be read for themselves as soon as they can read them beautifully. It is a mistake to use paraphrases of the text; the fine roll of Bible English appeals to children with a compelling music, and they will probably retain through life their first conception of the Bible scenes, and, also, the very words in which these scenes are portrayed. This is a great possession. Half the clever talk we hear to-day, and half the uneasiness which underlies this talk, are due to a thorough and perfect ignorance of the Bible text. The points of assault are presented to men’s minds naked and jagged, without atmosphere, perspective, proportion; until the Bible comes to mean for many, the speaking of Balaam’s ass or the standing still of the sun at Joshua’s bidding.
But let the imaginations of children be stored with the pictures, their minds nourished upon the words, of the gradually unfolding story of the Scriptures, and they will come to look out upon a wide horizon within which persons and events take shape in their due place and due proportion. By degrees, they will see that the world is a stage whereon the goodness of God is continually striving with the willfulness of man; that some heroic men take sides with God; and that others, foolish and headstrong, oppose themselves to Him. The fire of enthusiasm will kindle in their breast, and the children, too, will take their side, without much exhortation, or any thought or talk of spiritual experience. Home Education, p. 245-253.

**Mathematics**

The chief value of arithmetic, like that of the higher mathematics, lies in the training it affords the reasoning powers, and in the habits of insight, readiness, accuracy, intellectual truthfulness it engenders. There is no one subject in which good teaching effects more, as there is none in which slovenly teaching has more mischievous results. Home Education, p. 254.

Math curriculums abound in the homeschool community. The choice of which is best for your family takes study. However, for beginning concepts and early math we can recommend none more highly than Ruth Beechick’s *The Three R’s* (Mott Media, 2006). This book explains the concept each child must know to begin well, yet it is expressed so simply and the guidelines give so easy to follow, you may feel you need not use a full math curriculum until second or even third grade.

**Language Arts**

Miss Mason would not have addressed grammar, spelling, essay writing, reading literature as Language Arts. In most of her writings these subjects are handled individually. We use the contemporary term for convenience and because it is what most parents now understand.

Language Arts entail communicating through writing, speaking, reading, and listening. All of the various subjects studied in language arts such as phonics, grammar, comprehension, handwriting, punctuation, and spelling are tools for effective reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The various subjects of language arts instruction
assume their proper emphasis when we see them for what they are, simply tools to help children communicate well.

To learn more about penmanship, spelling, grammar and recitation, see Appendix A: For Further Study.

Science

Science was an emerging discipline in Charlotte Mason’s time. We can find indications in her writings of her excitement in the latest developments of science and of how best to approach the study of it.

Huxley’s axiom that science teaching in the schools should be of the nature of ‘common information’ is of use in defining our limitations in regard to the teaching of science. We find another limitation in the fact that children's minds are not in need of the mental gymnastics that such teaching is supposed to afford. They are entirely alert and eager to know. Books dealing with science as with history, say, should be of a literary character, and we should probably be more scientific as a people if we scrapped all the text-books which swell publishers’ lists and nearly all the chalk expended so freely on our blackboards.

Towards A Philosophy of Education, p. 218

In keeping with contemporary developments in science education, Living Books Curriculum addresses four major strands of science: life science, physical science, earth science, and health science. Within those strands, the curriculum incorporates eleven key themes: plants, animals, ecology, matter, energy, technology, the Earth, weather, space, the human body, and well-being. We do not use textbooks (except for a few in the upper grades) or workbooks. Instead, children learn science through high-quality, non-fiction books, 

Handbook of Nature Study—this consummate guide to nature study is one used throughout the Living Books Curriculum. This book is a guided exploration into almost any of nature’s wonders of which you can think. Each topic has an overview, suggestions for observation, a “leading thought” which explains what your child (and you!) should grasp from your study and suggestions for follow-up questions and activities.”
science activity and experiment books, and biographies of great men and women of science.

Nature Study

The purpose of nature study is to learn keen observation and an understanding of God’s absolutely amazing creation. It is also a beginning point for scientific study. Albert Einstein, one of the finest minds of the 20th century, said, “All great science begins with a close observation of nature”.

Time in the out-of-doors and nature study are related but not the same. Charlotte Mason taught that a child thrives by spending many hours in the out-of-doors. A relatively small—but important—part of that time should be Nature Study directed by the parent. LBC recommends scheduling a Nature Study once a week for no longer than 30 minutes, which includes the time of observation and an entry into the nature journal. Your child may be encouraged to do more than this, but not required.

Picture Study

Picture study is the study of artistic works in order to appreciate and understand the artist and artistic process. By examining and discussing many works of art, children build a habit of enjoying art in a thoughtful way and develop an aesthetic sense for what is truly worthwhile and beautiful. Miss Mason also felt that by asking the student to narrate the picture it also taught close attention to detail.

Composer Study

Miss Mason required the study of not only a musical instrument but the music of the composers. As with Picture Study she felt that each term should focus on the work of one composer.

Music, like art, engages the child’s love of beauty. LBCs Foundation Year music curriculum introduces children to music and movement by engaging them in singing, playing games that involve song, and listening to beautiful music. From Grade One through Eight, the children will explore the musical composers of the Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Contemporary periods, as well as Christian worship music. Each time period will include biographies of each of the composers studied.
**History**

Knowledge of history is indispensable to learning and character development. History provides a chronological framework for understanding human endeavor and God’s providential action in the lives of men and women. It also readies students for later work in any thoughtful endeavor because they have a framework from which to work.

Living Books Curriculum’s history includes a study of American history and world history. World history begins with creation and covers the major historical periods of western and eastern civilizations. A typical approach to world history is to begin with the onset of recorded history (about 4000 BC). A great deal takes place in the two thousand years before we have documented historical artifacts. Drawing from Genesis and archaeological information, our curriculum gives a sense for the sweep of time and God’s hand in it.

Living Books Curriculum offers American history coursework each year (as opposed to introducing it in third or fourth grade) for the following reasons:

- It is critical for children to grow up knowing the history of our nation in-depth.

- Godly men and women founded the United States with a desire for freedom of worship and self-governance.

- Learning our nation’s history is essential to a full, participatory citizenship.

- A full understanding of our role in the world today takes time. The American History curriculum extends from 1000 AD to the late 1900s in the first six years of coursework. We revisit these epochs in the following two years. The twentieth

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**History — A Storehouse of Ideas**

“Here, too, is a subject which should be to the child an inexhaustible storehouse of ideas, should enrich the chambers of his House Beautiful with a thousand tableaux, pathetic and heroic, and should form in him, insensibly, principles whereby he will hereafter judge of the behavior of nations, and will rule his own conduct as one of a nation.”

Home Education, p, 279
century is added in Grade Seven. By Grade Eight, students are studying primary
documents of American life.

**Geography**

Miss Mason wrote her own Geography textbook. While it is long out of date, it is
instructive to see that she used expressive, well-written sentences that stirred the
imagination to picture the place described. Many of our current geographies are
snippets of information that provide no clear flow of information to inspire a child.

Miss Mason saw the younger child as learning much first-hand knowledge in walks
outdoors and to the seaside. For older students, she also recommended map-making
from memory and then compared to the original.

Living Books Curriculum geography begins with developing a spatial sense, knowledge
of one’s neighborhood, home country, and familiarity with the seven continents.
Children then develop an understanding of nation-states and people groups and their
placement on the planet and recognize places and regions where historical events took
place.

**Foreign Languages**

Most PNEU schools studied Latin, German, French and often Greek simultaneously.
Ideally today we would be able to provide our children all these languages. While it
may not be practical to learn four languages at once, Latin and a foreign language are to
be encouraged. Living Books Curriculum suggests Latin studies beginning in Grade
Three or Four and recommends the award-winning Latin curriculum *Latinae Christiana*
([www.memoriapress.com](http://www.memoriapress.com))

The study of Latin is encouraged for three reasons. First, Latin teaches English better
than English teaches English. Students will be able to understand English syntax and
grammar far better with an understanding of Latin forms. Second, Latin is the mother
tongue of Western civilization—a language that incorporated the best ideas of the
ancient Greeks, and which, after the conversion of Rome, put them into the service of
Christian truth. Third, the mental discipline Latin instills in students makes it the ideal
foreign language to study because there is a high carry-over into other language
studies. While Living Books Curriculum does not sell language instruction, we do allow for it in planning for the week’s work.
Chapter 4: Putting it all together

“Habit is ten natures.” Home Education

In this chapter you are expecting a lot of how-to’s for scheduling. Right? Indeed, I will share what I recommend in putting together a schedule. However, all the schedules in the world will not accomplish the delight in learning and the sense of accomplishment your child can have without an understanding of habit training.

The importance of habit training to learning

All of us develop habits as we grow, and continue to acquire them in adulthood. Habits are behaviors repeated until they are done without making a conscious decision—habits originate in the mind.

Science shows us that the body’s tissues form in the direction of the repeated action so as to support it. Each repeated action of the body or the mind, whether good or ill, produces a physiological effect on the nervous system and the brain. There is literally a new “neural pathway” formed in the brain to accommodate the new habit. So, it becomes easier to do the thing for which there is a pathway laid down in the brain.

How does the formation of habit affect the educational process? It affects it in every way. For example, if we teach children through repeated action to attend to our words, they will do it without effort from you. The child will have harnessed his will to attend when you speak. The opposite is also true. The child can be taught to not listen through wrong methods.

The question is how does one instill in the child a desire to harness his will? Often parents impose their will on the child to make him do what they want him to do. This does not form a habit. It teaches the child to bend to the parent’s will; but it does not give the child practice in the use of his own will to do what is right. The formation of good, effectual habits in the life of a child is accomplished by patience, tact and watchfulness. Some of the educational habits to be desired are: thinking, imagining,
obedience, physical training, sweet thoughts, finishing, being of use, attending closely to what is said, and excellence.

**Education is the formation of habits**

The following is excerpted from *Home Education*. I recommend you read the entire section on habit (p. 96-102). It will be a great benefit to you as a home educator and personally.

_Habit the Instrument by which Parents Work._—’Habit is TEN natures!’ If I could but make others see with my eyes how much this saying should mean to the educator! How habit, in the hands of the mother, is as his wheel to the potter, his knife to the carver—the instrument by means of which she turns out the design she has already conceived in her brain. Observe, the material is there to begin with; his wheel will not enable the potter to produce a porcelain cup out of coarse clay; but the instrument is as necessary as the material or the design. It is unpleasant to speak of one’s self, but if the reader will allow me, I should like to run over the steps by which I have been brought to look upon habit as the means whereby the parent may make almost anything he chooses of his child. That which has become the dominant idea of one person’s life, if it be launched suddenly at another, conveys no very great depth or weight of meaning to the second person—he wants to get at it by degrees, to see the steps by which the other has travelled. Therefore, I shall venture to show how I arrived at my present position, which is, from one of the three possible points of view—The formation of habits is education, and Education is the formation of habits.

And again later in this discussion Miss Mason says....

_Habit rules ninety-nine in a hundred of our Thoughts and Acts._—In the first place, whether you choose or no to take any trouble about the formation of his habits, it is habit, all the same, which will govern ninety-nine one-hundredths of the child’s life: he is the mere automaton you describe. As for the child’s becoming the creature of habit, that is not left with the parent to determine. We are all mere creatures of habit. We think our accustomed thoughts, make our usual small talk, go through the trivial round, the common task, without any self-determining effort of will at all. If it were not so—if we had to think, to deliberate, about each operation of the bath or the table—life would not be worth having; the perpetually repeated effort of decision would wear us out. But, let us be
thankful, life is not thus laborious. For a hundred times we act or think, it is not necessary to choose, to will, say, more than once. And the little emergencies, which compel an act of will, will fall in the children’s lives just about as frequently as in our own. These we cannot save them from, nor is it desirable that we should. What we can do for them is to secure that they have habits which shall lead them in ways of order, propriety, and virtue, instead of leaving their wheel of life to make ugly ruts in miry places.

**Habit powerful even where the Will decides.**—And then, even in emergencies, in every sudden difficulty and temptation that requires an act of will, why, conduct is still apt to run on the lines of the familiar habit. The boy who has been accustomed to find both profit and pleasure in his books does not fall easily into idle ways because he is attracted by an idle schoolfellow. The girl who has been carefully trained to speak the exact truth simply does not think of a lie as a ready means of getting out of a scrape, coward as she may be.

But this doctrine of habit, is it, after all, any more than an empirical treatment of the child’s symptoms? Why should the doing of an act or the thinking of a thought, say, a score of times in unbroken succession, have any tendency to make the doing of that act or the thinking of that thought a part of the child’s nature? We may accept the doctrine as an act of faith resting on experience; but if we could discover the raison d’être of this enormous force of habit it would be possible to go to work on the laying down of habits with real purpose and method.

And last, Miss Mason explains how the training of good habits is done…..

**Tact, Watchfulness, and Persistence.**—For example, and to choose a habit of no great consequence except as a matter of consideration for others: the mother wishes her child to acquire the habit of shutting the door after him when he enters or leaves a room. Tact, watchfulness, and persistence are the qualities she must cultivate in herself; and, with these, she will be astonished at the readiness with which the child picks up the new habit.

**Stages in the Formation of a Habit.**—‘Johnny,’ she says, in a bright, friendly voice, ‘I want you to remember something with all your might: never go into or out of a room in which anybody is sitting without shutting the door.’
'But if I forget, mother?'
'I will try to remind you.'
'But perhaps I shall be in a great hurry.'
'You must always make time to do that.'
'But why, mother?'
'Because it is not polite to the people in the room to make them uncomfortable.'
'But if I am going out again that very minute?'
'Still, shut the door, when you come in; you can open it again to go out. Do you think you can remember?'
'I'll try, mother.' 'Very well; I shall watch to see how few "forgets" you make.'

For two or three times Johnny remembers; and then, he is off like a shot and half-way downstairs before his mother has time to call him back. She does not cry out, 'Johnny, come back and shut the door!' because she knows that a summons of that kind is exasperating to big or little. She goes to the door, and calls pleasantly, 'Johnny!' Johnny has forgotten all about the door; he wonders what his mother wants, and, stirred by curiosity, comes back, to find her seated and employed as before. She looks up, glances at the door, and says, 'I said I should try to remind you.' 'Oh, I forgot,' says Johnny, put upon his honour; and he shuts the door that time, and the next, and the next.

But the little fellow has really not much power to recollect, and the mother will have to adopt various little devices to remind him; but of two things she will be careful—that he never slips off without shutting the door, and that she never lets the matter be a cause of friction between herself and the child, taking the line of his friendly ally to help him against that bad memory of his. By and by, after, say, twenty shuttings of the door with never an omission, the habit begins to be formed; Johnny shuts the door as a matter of course, and his mother watches him with delight come into a room, shut the door, take something off the table, and go out, again shutting the door.

The Dangerous Stage.—Now that Johnny always shuts the door, his mother’s joy and triumph begin to be mixed with unreasonable pity. ‘Poor child,’ she says to herself, ‘it is very good of him to take so much pains about a little thing, just because he is bid!’ She thinks that, all the time, the child is making an effort for her sake; losing sight of the fact that the habit has become easy and natural, that, in fact, Johnny shuts the door without knowing that he does so. Now comes the critical moment. Some day Johnny is so taken up
with a new delight that the habit, not yet fully formed, loses its hold, and he is half-way downstairs before he thinks of the door. Then he does think of it, with a little prick of conscience, strong enough, not to send him back, but to make him pause a moment to see if his mother will call him back. She has noticed the omission, and is saying to herself, ‘Poor little fellow, he has been very good about it this long time; I’ll let him off this once.’ He, outside, fails to hear his mother’s call, says, to himself—fatal sentence!—‘Oh, it doesn’t matter,’ and trots off.

Next time he leaves the door open, but it is not a ‘forget.’ His mother calls him back in a rather feeble way. His quick ear catches the weakness of her tone, and, without coming back, he cries, ‘Oh, mother, I’m in such a hurry,’ and she says no more, but lets him off. Again he rushes in, leaving the door wide open. ‘Johnny!’—in a warning voice. ‘I’m going out again just in a minute, mother,’ and after ten minutes’ rummaging he does go out, and forgets to shut the door. The mother’s mis-timed easiness has lost for her every foot of the ground she had gained.

Remember Charlotte Mason said “Education is the formation of habits”?

So, no matter how many wonderful curricula you have, if your child is trained in poor habits then learning will be poor too. With this understanding as a home educator and parent, you can be watchful to train your children in good habits (and yourself!)

Now comes the scheduling.

**Planning for Learning™**

Miss Mason’s schools used the typical British system of three terms, with summers off. With homeschooling this system is not always feasible or even desirable. The Carroll’s traveled to Ambleside, England to consult the archives where Miss Mason and the PNEU materials are housed. What we learned was most enlightening. Based on an evaluation of the syllabi for each grade level, LBC developed its own schedule just for homeschooling families.

LBC uses a 36-week schedule divided into four terms. Each term is eight weeks of instruction, with the ninth as a “flex” week. The flex week permits the student to complete unfinished work, the teaching parent to assess learning through end-of-term
narration questions, and also allows time for field trips. You can begin and end each term as best fits your schedule.

If you would like to try the Planning for Learning™ system make a copy of the sample planner included in this chapter. On the planner you will see the Flex Week identified as well as the Six Tools checklist: Narration, Literature, Storytelling, Nature Study, Short Lessons, and Local Resources. If

**Sample day plan from LBC**

This schedule is intended to suggest how the homeschooling parent might divide the day, alternating between direct instruction and interactive learning. The final decision must be left to the teaching parent as the developers of this curriculum cannot know the individual circumstances of each learning environment.

9:00 - 9:20 Bible Study

9:30 - 9:50 Math

10:00 - 10:50 Language Arts (Alternate storytelling, reading aloud, writing, and reading instruction)

10:50 - 11:00 Snack time

11:00 - 11:20 Science or Nature Study

11:30 - 11:50 Picture Study, Art, or Music

12:00 - 12:20 Geography, World History or American History

12:30 - 2:00 Lunch and read aloud

2:00 - 4:00 Creative play, handcrafts, and outdoor play
Sample Weekly Plan

On this page is a sample from the LBC Grade One Teaching Guide. Note that not all subjects are taught every day.

The following is a suggestion of how you might organize your week. Please note that, except for Bible Study and Math, not every subject is taught every day. If you are new to organizing your time in this way, start with our suggested schedule and then adjust it as you learn what works for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Reading Instruction, Read Aloud</td>
<td>Poetry Penmanship</td>
<td>Reading Instruction Storytelling</td>
<td>Reading Instruction Penmanship</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Science</td>
<td>Nature Study</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture Study, Art, or Music</td>
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<td>World History</td>
<td>American History</td>
<td>American History</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LBC Weekly Planner

Click on the link below and you will be taken to a general planner than can be used throughout. Just so you know, our LBC Grade Level Planners are tailored to the needs of each grade level.

https://s3.amazonaws.com/LBC_Curriculum/lesson_planner_template.doc
Chapter 5: Further Study in CM

Here is a list of articles included in this ebook and links to Living Books Curriculum’s website. The specific topics are ones we thought would be most of interest to our families.

Contents:

“Charlotte Mason on Studying History”

“Royal Road to Spelling”

“Charlotte Mason on Penmanship”

“Five Ways to Prevent Dawdling”

“Curriculum Help in Teaching Multiple Children”

Books, Articles and Audios Found on LBC’s website:

Telling Back: The Art of Narration (ebook)

Home Education (Vol. 1) by Charlotte Mason (ebook)

Picture Study: Teaching Children to Love Great Art (ebook)

A Charlotte Mason Education for the 21st Century (audio)

Teaching History with Living Books (audio)

The Missing Ingredient in Reading Instruction (audio)

Part 1  Part 2
“With Patience and Care: Using Charlotte Mason Education with Special Needs Children” (article)

“Science with Living Books” (article)

“Timelines that Teach” (article)

“Planning a Nature Walk” (article)
Charlotte Mason on Studying History

Charlotte Mason often wrote on the subject of history and found it vital to an educated and “sane mind”. Here are a few thoughts to consider:

The “why” of studying history: “It is a great thing to possess a pageant of history the background of one’s thoughts. We may not be able to recall this or that circumstance, but ‘the imagination is warmed’. Philosophy of Education (POE), p.178

On living history books: “We must read history and think about it to understand how …we owe a great debt of gratitude to the historians … who call in Imagination to picture for them the men and events of the past…so that everything seemed to take place again before their eyes, and they were able to write of it for us. But their seeing and writing is not of much use to us unless, in our case, Lord Intellect invites Imagination to go forth with him, and we think of things and figure them to ourselves until at last they are real and alive to us.” Ourselves, p.37

On a course of study: “…no youth should go to college without (a) rudimentary course of English, European, and, especially, French history.” POE, p.177.

On visiting historical sites: “Possibly there is no sounder method of inculcating a sane and serviceable patriotism than this of making children familiar with the monuments of the great.” POE, p. 174.

On the need for a comprehensive program:

Perhaps the gravest defect in school curricula is that they fail to give a comprehensive, intelligent and interesting introduction to history. To leave off or even to begin with the history of our own country is fatal. We cannot live sanely unless we know that other peoples are as we are with a difference, that they too have been represented by their poets and artists, that they too have their literature and their national life.” Philosophy of Education, p. 178.
The Royal Road to Spelling

~This article first appeared in LBC’s newsletter Parent’s Journal, May, 2006~

“The whole secret of spelling lies in the habit of visualizing words from memory…”

Charlotte Mason used dictation, usually from a work of literature the children were currently reading, as the “royal road to spelling.” She felt that if a child was a poor speller is was usually a sign of too little reading of high quality literature or skimming the text without the habit of seeing the words.

Miss Mason describes it this way: “The gift of spelling depends upon the power the eye possesses to ‘take’ (in a photographic sense) a detailed picture of a word; and this is a power and habit, which must be cultivated in children from the first. When they have read ‘cat,’ they must be encouraged to see the word with their eyes shut, and the same habit will enable them to image ‘Thermopylae.’

This picturing of words upon the retina appears to be to be the only royal road to spelling; an error once made and corrected leads to fearful doubt for the rest of one’s life, as to which was the wrong way and which is the right. Most of us are haunted by some doubt as to whether ‘balance,’ for instance, should have one ‘l’ or two; and the doubt is born of a correction. Once the eye sees a misspelled word, that image remains; and if there is also the image of the word rightly spelt, we are perplexed as to which is which. Now we see why there could not be a more ingenious way of making bad spellers than ‘dictation’ as it is commonly taught. Every misspelled word is in image in the child’s brain not to be obliterated by the right spelling. It becomes, therefore, the teacher’s business to prevent false spelling, and, if an error has been made, to hide it away, as it were, so that the impression may not become fixed.

Steps of a Dictation Lesson

Dictation lessons, conducted in some such way as the following, usually result in good spelling.

• A child of eight or nine prepares a paragraph, older children a page, or two or three pages. (That is, the child looks at the selection)
• The child prepares by himself, by looking at the word he is not sure of, and then seeing it with his eyes shut.

• Before he begins, the teacher asks what words he thinks will need his attention. He generally knows, but the teacher may point out any word likely to be a cause of stumbling.

• He lets his teacher know when he is ready.

• The teacher asks if there are any words he is not sure of. These she puts, one by one, on the blackboard, letting the child look till he has a picture, and then rubbing the word out.

• If anyone is still doubtful he should be called to put the word he is not sure of on the board, the teacher watching to rub out the word when a wrong letter begins to appear, and again helping the child to get a mental picture.

• Then the teacher gives out the dictation, clause by clause, each clause repeated once.

She dictates with a view to the pointing (punctuation), which the children are expected to put in as they write; but they must not be told ‘comma,’ ‘semicolon,’ etc.

• After the sort of preparation I have described, which takes ten minutes or less, there is rarely an error in spelling. If there be, it is well worth while for the teacher to be on the watch with slips of stamp-paper to put over the wrong word, that its image may be erased as far as possible.

• At the end of the lesson, the child should again study the wrong word in his book until he says he is sure of, and should write it correctly on the stamp-paper.

_A lesson of this kind secures the hearty co-operation of children, who feel they take their due part in it; and it also prepares them for the second condition of good spelling, which is—much reading combined with the habit of imagining the words as they are read._ Home Education, p. 240-241
Charlotte Mason on Penmanship

The book referred to in this article as A New Handwriting, is, of course, long out of print. There is a current version of this book by Penny Gardner, Italics: Beautiful handwriting for children which can be purchased from LBC. It is an affordable, easy to use guide.

Perfect Accomplishment.—I can only offer a few hints on the teaching of writing, though much might be said. First, let the child accomplish something perfectly in every lesson—a stroke, a pothook, a letter. Let the writing lesson be short; it should not last more than five or ten minutes. Ease in writing comes by practice; but that must be secured later. In the meantime, the thing to be avoided is the habit of careless work—humpy 'm's, angular o's.

Printing.—But the child should have practice in printing before he begins to write. First, let him print the simplest of the capital letters with single curves and straight lines. When he can make the capitals and large letters, with some firmness and decision, he might go on to the smaller letters—'printed' as in the type we call 'italics,' only upright,—as simple as possible, and large.

Steps in Teaching.—Let the stroke be learned first; then the pothook; then the letters of which the pothook is an element—n, m, v, w, r, h, p, y; then o, and letters of which the curve is an element a, c, g, e, x, s, q; then looped and irregular letters—b, l, f, t, etc. One letter should be perfectly formed in a day, and the next day the same elemental forms repeated in another letter, until they become familiar. By-and-by copies, three or four of the letters they have learned grouped into a word—'man,' 'aunt'; the lesson to be the production of the written word once without a single fault in any letter. At this stage the chalk and blackboard are better than pen and paper, as it is well that the child should rub out and rub out until his own eye is satisfied with the word or letter he has written.

Of the further stages, little need be said. Secure that the child begins by making perfect letters and is never allowed to make faulty ones, and the rest he will do for himself; as for 'a good hand,' do not hurry him; his 'handwriting' will come by-and-by out of the character that is in him; but, as a child, he cannot be said, strictly speaking, to have character. Set good copies before him, and see that he imitates his model dutifully: the writing lesson being not so many lines, or 'a copy'—that is, a page of writing—but a single line which is as exactly as possible a copy of the characters set. The child may have to write several lines before he succeeds in producing this.

Text-Hand—If he writes in books with copperplate headlines (which are, on the whole, to be eschewed), discrimination should be exercised in the choice of these; in many of them the writing is atrocious, and the letters are adorned with flourishes which increase the pupil's labor but by no means improve his style. One word more; do not hurry the child into 'small hand'; it is unnecessary that he should labor much over what is called 'large hand,' but 'text-hand,' the
medium size, should be continued until he makes the letters with ease. It is much easier for the child to get into an irregular scribble by way of 'small-hand,' than to get out of it again. In this, as in everything else, the care of the educator must be given, not only to the formation of good, but to the prevention of bad habits.

A 'New Handwriting.'—Some years ago I heard of a lady who was elaborating, by means of the study of old Italian and other manuscripts, a 'system of beautiful handwriting' which could be taught to children. I waited patiently, though not without some urgency, for the production of this new kind of 'copy-book.' The need for such an effort was very great, for the distinctly commonplace writing taught from existing copy-books, however painstaking and legible, cannot but have a rather vulgarizing effect both on the writer and the reader of such manuscript. At last the lady, Mrs. Robert Bridges, has succeeded in her tedious and difficult undertaking, and this book for teachers will enable them to teach their pupils a style of writing which is pleasant to acquire because it is beautiful to behold. It is surprising how quickly young children, even those already confirmed in 'ugly' writing, take to this 'new handwriting.'

A child must first learn to control his hand and constrain it to obey his eye; at this earliest stage, any simple forms will serve the purpose; and hence it might be further argued that the forms are always indifferent, and that full mastery of the hand can be as well attained by copying bad models as good; but this can hardly be: the ordinary copybook, the aim of which seems to be to economize the component parts of the letters, cannot train the hand as more varied shapes will; nor does this uniformity, exclusive of beauty, offer as good training to the eye.

Moreover, I should say that variety and beauty of form are attractive, even to little children, and that the attempt to create something which interests them, cheers and crowns their stupendous efforts with a pleasure that cannot be looked for in the task of copying monotonous shapes. But whether such a hand as that here shown lends itself as easily as the more uniform model to the development of a quick, useful cursive, I cannot say; and it is possible that the degradations, inevitable in the habit of quick writing, might produce a mere untidiness, almost the worst reproach of penmanship. Some of the best English hands of to-day are as good a quick cursive as one can desire, and show points of real beauty; but such hands are rare, and are only those which have, as we say, character; which probably means that the writer would have done well for himself under any system: whereas the average hands, which are the natural outcome of the old copybook writing, degraded by haste, seem to owe their common ugliness to the mean type from which they sprang; and the writers, when they have occasion to write well, find they can do but little better, and only prove that haste was not the real cause of their bad writing.
Five Ways to Prevent Dawdling

~This article originally appeared in Parent’s Journal, March, 2006~

Recently a mother asked for guidance in preventing “dawdling”. “Dawdling” means to take more time than necessary to complete something. Charlotte Mason wrote of the importance of securing a child’s full attention and establishing the habit of finishing things.

If your child is taking more time than necessary, try these methods:

Use 20-minute lessons. If a 20-minutes lesson is too long, shorten it. Set a timer for your child, so he has a clear sense of how long the lesson is to be.

Use material that is appropriate. Requiring a short narration will demonstrate whether you need to adapt the material or find other material for the work you want to accomplish. A child cannot narrate what she do not know or understand.

Alternate disciplinary subjects with inspirational subjects. Charlotte Mason recommended a disciplinary subject be followed by an inspirational one. Dr. Jack Beckman, Professor of Education at Covenant College in South Carolina and a Charlotte Mason scholar reminds us that, “Inspirational subjects touch heart and mind and are reflective of things such as art, music, literature, history, etc. Disciplinary subjects are those in which teacher-student interactions are necessary as students are unable to apprehend their concepts, content, and/or skills alone – mathematics, languages, handwriting, certain aspects of science, etc.”

Establish the habit of finishing work in a timely way. Charlotte Mason said, “Habit is ten nature”. In other words, once the habit forms it is as if it were the child’s very nature to be that way. To read more on habit formation see Home Education, p.96-134. The full text can be found online at

Each new lesson should recall the last. When starting a new lesson ask your child to recall the lesson that came the day before. Recollection of the previous lesson gives a context for the new knowledge.
Further Reading

Listed below are several well-known titles of books explaining Charlotte Mason’s educational method.

*Charlotte Mason’s Original Homeschooling Series* by Charlotte Mason

*A Charlotte Mason Companion: Personal Reflections on the Gentle Art of Learning* by Karen Andreola

*A Charlotte Mason Education*, by Catherine Levison

*When Children Love to Learn: A Practical Application of Charlotte Mason’s Philosophy for Today*, by Elaine Cooper
Appendix: More about Living Books Curriculum

Seven Reasons to Purchase Living Books Curriculum

Living Books Curriculum is…

1. Christ-centered

   LBC teaches from a Christian worldview.

   Believes that character, not knowledge, is the end of education.

   Uses bible memorization and narration of bible passages extensively.

2. Easy to use with our Teaching Guide

   Each guide contains:

   An easy to use Week-by-Week detail of work for the week. Allows you to schedule the day and time that works best.

   Notes for each grade which provide important information for the parent on how to get maximum benefit from the books

   Support materials, such as a planner for scheduling, sample day and week schedule, maps, supplementary readings lists, poetry and more.

   A CD which contains many helpful articles and useful tools (Grades One, Four and Five currently have a CD.)

3. Ease of learning for your children using living books and life-experiences

   Our teaching methodology based on Charlotte Mason’s educational philosophy

   - Child is seen as a person
   - Narration used extensively
   - Living books used extensively
   - Short lessons used to teach attentiveness
   - Emphasizes the value of habit training

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www.charlottemasonhomeschooling.com
• Art, picture study, music, and nature study are part of the core curriculum
• Elimination of textbooks and workbooks
• Use of local resources as teaching tool

4. Orality a key component of Living Books Curriculum

Use of orality (speaking and listening) as a key to learning and literacy

Forms of oral language experiences: narration, storytelling, recitation, discourse, reading aloud, logopoeia.

5. Ease of Planning

LBC has developed a Planning for Learning™ system which utilizes a 36-week school year with four terms of eight weeks each. The ninth week of each term is a flex week in which no new material is taught and the end-of-term assessment questions are used to assess learning.

Ability to teach multiple grade levels (e.g. Gr.1/2)

Adaptable to child’s interests/ abilities

6. Ease of Assessment

LBC uses end-of-term narration questions in each grade-level syllabus just as Charlotte Mason did to ensure the learning has taken place.

7. Ease of purchase

Customers can purchase as few or as many books as they wish.

We guarantee you will love our curriculum. We have a 60-day, 100% refund policy on all books and materials, less shipping costs. However, if you should decide our curriculum is not for you, the books must be returned in resalable condition.

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