



Four Reasons Why a Charlotte Mason Education Is Better Than a Workbook-Textbook Education

Sheila Carroll

Living Books Curriculum

Previously published in [LINK Homeschool Magazine](#), February 2009.

Karen, a homeschooling mother, called me in tears, “I can’t seem to get school done in a day. We start at nine and are still working at three or four in the afternoon, with only a break for lunch. I make the kids stay until their worksheets are done. They hate school and I am worn out. What can I do?”

This mother was doing her utmost to give her children a quality education but she didn’t see joy in learning *or* learning. I asked her why she chose to use workbooks and textbooks for her homeschool curriculum. “It’s what I used in public school. Isn’t that what you do when you homeschool—bring school home?”

“No,” I said, “Your *home* is a garden of learning and your children are tender plants. You must give them what they need to grow.”

“How do I do that?” she asked.

“Well, there are four ‘firsts’ that when you have mastered these you will be well on your way to joyful learning.”

1. The Child as Person

The first “first” is to see your children as persons. There are usually two views of children in education; others are variations on these two. The first sees the child as a product of his environment. I call it the “child as bucket” approach, from the quote by W.B. Yeats, “Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire”

In this view the child is a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) on which to write or a bucket to fill. Put another way, the child is born with no built-in mental content, in a word, “blank”. His fund of knowledge is built up gradually through delivery of information via the educational process. In this view, content from the academic disciplines is divided into twelve parts called grades. Each grade is added to the bucket. At the end of twelve years, ideally, the bucket is full and the child is finished with basic education.

You can see this view in operation when doing worksheets. Complete all the answers correctly and you have added a little bit more to your bucket. The problem with this view is that most workbooks ask you to memorize facts which are usually out of context. The facts go into short-term memory and are retained long enough to “get the grade” and seldom longer.

The second view is “the child as person”. In this view the child seen as coming into the world complete and full of endless possibilities. Your duty as parent is to respect the personality of the child and call forth the inborn possibilities. This view is central to the teachings of Charlotte Mason. Just as viewing the “child as bucket” affects every aspect of learning, so too the “child as person” changes everything.

Children *become* adults through the process of taking up knowledge that is proper to them through the effort of self-will. What they lack is not maturity but guidance, nurture, and opportunity. Your role as their teacher is to provide those things. How is this done? Miss Mason in her twenty principles made it clear: We are limited to three educational instruments—the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas.

Miss Mason was the quintessential homeschooling mother even though she had no children herself. She saw the home as the natural environment for the child. Rather than an artificial classroom with a great deal of glitzy teaching aides, she felt a child thrived on a few, high quality books, time in the out of doors and “hands-on” learning. When she spoke of “education as an atmosphere” she meant that a child not only learns *from* book but in an environment where his learning is

2. Whole Books

The second “first”....you must use whole books, not adaptation or summaries.

“Even for their earliest reading lessons, it is unnecessary to put twaddle into the hands of children.” (*Home Education*, p. 186)

Most textbooks have short descriptions of a topic, which is then broken down into subtopics. Literature textbooks are usually adaptations or excerpts of classics. Miss Mason termed these, “dumbed-down” texts. The publishers were attempting to create a book that could be used by students of every level of ability. The only way to produce a text for all is to lower the level of material to the lowest common denominator. This is commonplace today. A textbook publisher expressed his dismay at the continuing decline of the quality of textbooks:

“In the past few years, the demand for dumbed-down books has increased because many schools have abandoned the strategy of grouping students according to their abilities. Instead, these schools indiscriminately mix together, in the same courses and the same classrooms, students who vary widely in their talents, intellectual capacities, goals, and states of preparation.” (William J. Bennetta, *The Textbook Letter*, May-June 1997)

In sharp contrast, Miss Mason recommended using only high-quality literature which she called “living books”. Living books are books by a single author who has a passion for his subject and has written compellingly and expressively. A living book should be not only enjoyable to read, but challenging and memorable for the listener or reader.

Why is it important to give children good books? Because, they *are* good! 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. Great literature fosters creative thinking, and provides models of thinking, feeling, and acting that are in accordance with the best of human nature.

3. Learning Is More than Remembering

The third “first” is to understand the difference between learning and memory. A common misconception is that learning is the same as memory. They are closely linked—but they are not the same thing. A person can recall facts of a topic, but that doesn’t mean he have learned it. True he possesses something; but how far can these facts take him? Can he create a new thought with the facts, assess the truth of them, or generalize to grasp underlying principles?

Memorizing facts is a relatively low-level of learning and there is little real thinking going on. Yet this is primary activity in a workbook/ textbook education. In a Charlotte Mason education children are always working towards higher levels of the thought, yet at the same time are making regular use of memory.

One helpful way to understand differing types and levels of thinking is to look at Bloom’s Taxonomy of Thought. Benjamin Bloom and several colleagues studied learning and identified six types of thought that go from the simplest to the most complex. The categories can be thought of as degrees of difficulties. That is, the first one must be mastered before the next one can take place: Here the six levels with action verbs to describe them:

1. Knowledge—name, list, define, copy
2. Comprehension—associate, compare, distinguish, extend
3. Application—apply, classify, change, illustrate, solve, demonstrate, calculate
4. Analysis—analyze, arrange, connect, divide, infer
5. Synthesis—combine, compose, generalize, modify, invent, create, integrate
6. Evaluation—assess, decide, discriminate, measure, rank, conclude, judge

Levels 1 to 3 are called “lower-level thinking” and Levels 4 to 6 are called “higher-level thinking”. Because typical education must be able to measure results in quantitative terms, using standardized tests, the first three levels are used almost exclusively. A child earning an A or 100% at the first three levels has demonstrated that they can recall and use facts.

A child who can create an original work from the facts or assess the truth or worth of the facts is said to use “higher-level thinking skills”. Because it is difficult to quantitatively measure higher-level thinking skills, they are often ignored in the workbook/textbook method.

How can a homeschooling parent move their child from the lower three levels to the upper three of thinking? The most effective means is narration. Again, Charlotte Mason shows us the way.

Narration is retelling in one’s own words what has been read (either aloud or silently). It is a natural way to demonstrate and organize learning, and it uses all levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

“Narrating is an art, like poetry-making or painting...it is there in every child’s mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the process of disciplinary education.” (*Home Education*, p. 231)

Charlotte Mason’s idea of narration as a tool for self-education and assessment is far broader in intent than mere “parroting back” of information. Narration involves really attending to the reading and restating it in one’s own words. Children are capable of absorbing and recalling an enormous amount of information, *as long as it is in context*. This is the key to learning. Give a child great literature and the ideas he takes up will be great and, it follows, that the narration of these ideas will be of equal quality..

IV. Habit Formation Is Essential

The fourth “first” is to put at your disposal one of the most powerful tools of education---the formation of good habits. If the child is given dumb-down textbooks and worksheets, he quickly learns to either dawdle or get done as quickly as possible. Neither one is desirable and neither one taps into those all important higher levels of thought.

With “the child as person” view, we understand that the child will need guidance and nurture to know how to consistently take up knowledge. This is habit formation:

“Habit is ten natures...We all know how the physical effort of smiling affects ourselves in our sour moods...Both (soul and body) are at our service in laying down the rails, so to speak, upon which the good life must needs run.” (*Philosophy of Education*, p. 100)

Miss Mason’s point is that the power of habit is greater than the power of our own natures. This principle, if rightly understood, is the most powerful of her ideas. A workbook/textbook education does not teach habits *per se*, because it is assumed that habit formation is not the work of education. Charlotte Mason education sees habit formation as the key to a full, rich life.

The formation of habit affects the educational process in every way. For example, if we teach a child through repeated action to attend to our words, after a time he will do it without effort. The child has harnessed his will to attend when you speak. The opposite is also true. We can actually teach children to be inattentive by doing things that reinforce the behavior, for example, over-long lessons, inappropriate learning materials, or too many of the same kinds of lessons.

Neuroscience indicates that repeated actions of the body or the mind, whether good or ill, produce 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 (rail) laid down in the brain.

Often parents impose their will on a child to make him do what they want, thinking this is habit formation. This teaches the child to bend to the parent’s will, but it does not give the child practice in the exercise 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: careful thinking, imagining, obedience, physical training, sweet thoughts, finishing, being of use, attending closely to what is said, and excellence.

To begin a new habit, you must determine first if you possess that trait. Are you a good example of the habit you want to instill? If not, then this must be accomplished first. Once ready, the parent discusses with the child what is expected. It is not presented harshly or in an authoritarian tone, but rather with a sense of expectation that what you say will be done. Then, you must watch over the seed you have planted to gently remind the child what is the thing to be done. Always speak with a sense of anticipation that the thing will be done. Approaching it this way makes you the child’s ally rather than his adversary.

Four Reasons and More...

Karen began to apply the four “firsts” and little by little she saw her children’s smiles return. Now they *eagerly ask* for their school books to be read to them. Karen is one of many moms who know in their heart that there is more to homeschooling than bringing school home. And there is.

Your view of the child as a person, whole books, understanding learning and habit formation are four reasons why Charlotte Mason’s methods give your child a far better education than using workbooks or textbooks.

But, there’s more. Read Miss Mason’s six-volume set, *The Original Homeschooling Series*. It is a treasure-trove of insight into children and learning. Begin to use her methods in your homeschool. See for yourself how they transform learning. You’ll be glad you did.

Sheila Carroll is founder of Living Books Curriculum, a K-8 Charlotte Mason curriculum for the 21st century. The proceeds of Living Books Curriculum support the use of their curriculum in developing nations.