

The Teaching Methods of Charlotte Mason.<sup>1</sup>  
AN EXPERIMENT AT LOWER EAST STREET BOYS SCHOOL.  
BY G. F. HUSBAND.

EDUCATION is everybody's concern, as pupil, teacher, parent, ratepayer: and our profession is very frequently assailed with new ideas. "Schemes may come and schemes may go, but the schools go on for ever." We have never had a perfect scheme and we never shall, because the further we go, the further we see to go. Moreover, "Many men, many minds." Two equally capable and earnest persons may come to diametrically opposite conclusions on the same subject.

A tailor cuts a suit, a joiner shapes a door. They learn *at once* whether the new method is effective or no. Teachers wait months, perhaps years, to test a new idea.

Some teachers are swayed by every little puff. That is foolish, and rarely accomplishes much. Others refuse to consider anything fresh. That is very often the self-sufficient stupidity of a dull mind. Whatever the cause, the attitude is entirely wrong, for it is our bounden duty to consider all innovations and adopt or adapt as our needs dictate.

Then there are those who after a cursory glance pass a very emphatic judgment. This is dishonest. Definite opinions should not be expressed about subjects of which we know little or nothing. It is just as well to remember that what we say or think about a fact does not alter the fact itself: that every time we sit in judgment on a great movement it also sits in judgment on us. I have in mind a teacher who after a few casual enquiries, said: "Oh! I'll not adopt Miss Mason's scheme: *it leaves nothing to the teacher.*"

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This brings a smile to those who know the scheme. What the teacher said in effect was this: "Before my class I am 'the great I am,' I am: and Miss Mason shall not dethrone me."

Our elementary schools have come in for much criticism of late, criticism that I consider foolish, because an attempt is made to measure something scarcely ponderable: and worse still, the measurement is attempted by a false standard. Each of us knows what a revolution has taken place, during the last decade, in the work of the Elementary School: and yet critics constantly arise who attempt to gauge the modern product by the mid-Victorian standard of their own boyhood!!

Now, how *are* we to judge whether a school is effective or not? I get many visitors to my school since I adopted the P.N.E.U. programme and I am always interested in their attitude. I ask each of my readers, if you visited a school,

How would you judge?

What would you look for?

Would you like to see if the writing were as good as yours? or the Handwork? or the Sewing? or the Drawing? or the Spelling? (I am always asked about spelling). Would you wish to read compositions to see if they were as quaint or original as yours?

How would you judge?

The subjects I have enumerated are important, but achievement in them is relative and depends on many factors. Without in any way minimising their importance, I consider the following more important. I do not give them in order of merit: they overlap and are interdependent.

First: Are the children *FREE*? or is the teacher a dominating driving force? Do the children work of themselves? We hear much of Child Study by the teacher. Have you ever considered the amount of Teacher Study forced on the child? Some teachers dominate their pupils' every thought and action. To the child the work should be more important than the teacher, who should be the least obvious person in the class room. I would look then for happy, eager work without restraint or fear of punishment. This

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is the aim of all plans and schemes attracting the attention of the Teaching World. Secure it, and the standard of achievement will be as high as possible for your particular school.

Secondly: Are the children in the teacher's leading strings? Do they depend upon him for information? or are they learning to help themselves from the realms of gold about them? For after all, when a child leaves school he is just beginning his education. He has years and years before him in which he will have to educate himself. The great teachers of the world are not schoolmasters and school-mistresses. They are the writers of books—poets, dramatists, scientists; and painters, sculptors, musicians. Mr. Wood, the President of the Board of Education, writing to the Exhibition Committee of the Nottingham Education Week said,

“Nothing can make visible the invisibility or real work of a school, the training of mind and character. We cannot weigh education in the scales and sell it or give it away and satisfy ourselves that we are getting good money's worth, for education is imponderable. . . . To the child I would say, go on reading until you can read with such facility that the books which seem difficult to others may seem easy to you. You will then be on the threshold of education and ready to begin the lifelong task of educating yourselves.”

Are the children, then, learning to get information themselves from books? Are they doing this every day, in every way, in every subject, or are they in the teacher's leading strings?

Thirdly: Are they receiving vitalising ideas on every relation of life, every department of knowledge, every subject of thought? When we launch the children from the schools, are they beginning to appreciate good literature, good music, good pictures? Are they beginning to understand their duties as citizens? Will they with a little more experience be able to “look at life steady and see it whole?” Above all, will they have alert, active minds, ready to pounce upon and assimilate the essentials of the daily work they have undertaken?

If there is an impulse *throughout the school* in these directions, the school is effective.

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They are achieved in a P.U.S. School by a combination of

- (a) Charlotte Mason's methods;
- (b) A programme of work.

Let us consider them quite apart.

I was asked recently, who is Charlotte Mason?

Charlotte Mason died in the early part of last year, aged eighty-one. At one time she taught as an elementary schoolmistress in Worthing. Later, she was Mistress of Method and Lecturer in Physiology at Chichester Training College. If you have not read any of her books, I earnestly commend to your notice “School Education,” “Home Education,” and a pamphlet “A Liberal Education for all.” Wherever her name is mentioned, I feel the need to restrain my enthusiasm, lest I convey an impression of gross exaggeration: but I do feel that one day she

will be regarded as a gigantic figure among educational reformers, not only of this but of all time.

She noticed that children possess unlimited powers of attention and observation, and that we steadily kill those powers.

How?

By questions and repetitions.

“Attention will go halt all its days if we accustom it to the crutch. We think we shall be heard by much speaking. We repeat and enforce, explain and illustrate, because we depreciate children and we depreciate knowledge. Our deadly error is to assume that we are the child’s showman to the universe and that there is no communion between him and the universe but what we choose to set up.”

Her message to you is “Believe in the child, trust the child and you will be astounded at its courage.”

She chanced upon many things in the behaviour of mind. This is one of them:

The mind never gives full attention to anything it has a chance to re-read or re-hear. This is a trick of the mind, and you cannot control it. You cannot will the mind to give full attention. Suppose you were in much pain, dying in fact: and a great physician said to you “Follow these instructions (holding up a card) and your pain will vanish and you will live.” Suppose I seize the card and

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say “You have a minute to read it, and then I will destroy it.” Your mind would instantly give those details its full attention. And what would you do next? You would immediately go over those instructions in your mind. I can imagine your lips moving in the process.

Well, there you have our method in a nutshell:—

(1) Compel the mind to give its full attention, by allowing once reading only or once telling.

(2) Give it the opportunity to do what it will proceed to do—narrate. If you do not, you will get undigested facts, mental indigestion, and that dullness and dislike of school so often manifest in children about 14 years of age.

Now this narration is no mere cramming up of facts. You must narrate before you know. It’s a psychological fact that there is

NO IMPRESSION WITHOUT EXPRESSION.

It is very easy to say this: it is so difficult to convey the full import. Narration properly used “is a magical creative process, much as though a sculptor conceived a frieze and then worked it out in low relief on his block.”

“Tell me what you have read” soon gives way to definite tasks in which a child is compelled to generalize, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour with his mind in some way or other. There is no limit to it. I could set a task to the most able minded adult here, on the simplest nursery rhyme, that would make him think.

We have got to make the child labour with his mind. Before he can do this, his mind must be fed. “Knowledge is to the mind what food is to the body: without it one faints and flags and eventually perishes as surely as does the other.”

How are we to impart the knowledge? By oral lessons?

“Oral lessons are often mere twaddle and at their best far below the ordered treatment of the same subject by an original mind in the right book. Is there any one here arrogant enough to believe that he can teach every subject in a full curriculum with the original thought and exact knowledge shown by a man who has written a book on his life’s study. The mass of knowledge evoking vivid imagination and sound judgment acquired in a term from the [p 99]

proper books is many times as great, many times as vivid than had the children listened to the words of the most effective teacher.”

A short time ago I visited a school in a neighbouring town. It was considered the best school in the town. I listened to a lesson given by the Head Teacher who was a most delightful personality and an enthusiastic teacher. It was the type of lesson in which I myself used to revel—questioning the children into a maze of doubt and then questioning them out of it: dropping the grains of knowledge after the mind was cleared to receive them. The teacher enjoyed himself, the children enjoyed themselves and had many a hearty laugh.

The lesson lasted nearly an hour: but a child trained to read *could have acquired much more information in less than two minutes, from the right book.*

*From the right book*, mark you. There are books and text books. “Text books are usually compressed and recompressed from one or more larger books. One kind is dry and uninteresting and enumerates details: the other easy and beguiling. There is no educational value in either,” and so we of the P.U.S. avoid them. One of the outstanding advantages of membership is that from term to term we are introduced to the right book at the right time. A programme of work is issued for each term. At the end of the term questions are set on the term’s work. One complete set of answers from each class is sent to Ambleside. These are marked and criticised. They are then returned and help to gauge the work of all the pupils. The current programme is the 97th, which means that this selection of books, setting of questions, criticising of papers has been proceeding for over thirty-two years—surely a tried and tested scheme.

Let us consider the work Standard VI & VII has just completed. The subjects dealt with are:—Bible Lessons, Writing, Dictation, Composition, English Grammar, Literature, English History, General History, Citizenship, Geography, Natural History and Botany, General Science, Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, German, Italian, Latin, French, Drawing, Recitation, Reading, Musical Appreciation, Singing, Drill, Handicrafts. I have only space to [p 100]

deal with one or two subjects. Each subject in the programme receives the same breadth of treatment as those I deal with. *Literature*: “The History of English Literature for Boys and Girls” by H.E. Marshall. Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”; Kingsley’s “Westward Ho!”; “An Anthology of English Lyrics,” “Don Quixote.”

Consider the first book. I do not believe in books about books, but this is a very emphatic exception. It leads us through the Magic Door and whets our appetite to such an extent that only a hearty meal from the original books satisfies us. In it we are introduced this term to Spencer’s “Faery Queen,” “About the First Theatres,” “Shakespeare,” “Jonson,” Raleigh’s “The Revenge” and “The History of the World,” and Bacon’s “New Atlantis.”

Notice how this is interwoven with the History syllabus. Wherever possible all the subjects are linked in this way, each throwing light on the other.

*English History*: Arnold Forster's "A History of England."

*General History*: "The Story of Mankind," by H. van Loon. "The British Museum for Children," by Frances Epps. "Stories from Indian History."

"The Story of Mankind" needs no "bush." You see at once how it broadens the outlook, how it reveals to the children that much of what they know of English History is only part of great movements that swept across Europe.

"The British Museum shown to children" I translate into "The Local Museum shown to children."

*Citizenship*: "Ourselves," by Charlotte Mason. North's "Plutarch's Lives: Aristides." L. S. Woods' "The Golden Fleece."

"*Ourselves*"—the one manual of practical psychology for children. Consider Chapter XVI. Some causes of lying—Malicious Lies, Cowardly Lies, The Falsehood of Reserve, Boasting Lies, Romancing Lies, Lies for Friendship's sake. These subjects are discussed in a simple, direct manner. The children debate them in connection with all the incidents arising in their books, or their own actual experience. The tendency to lie is soon checked in a boy who has to stand before a class that can coldly and justly analyze his motives.

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Plutarch: This is the greatest surprise I had. At this point, I would remind you that previous to adopting the P.N.E.U. programme, I had no experience, and I have not yet been in any P.N.E.U. School or seen any P.N.E.U. work, other than my own. I had only read Charlotte Mason's books and knew in my heart that they were true: but when I saw Plutarch on the programme, I thought it was a trifle far fetched. My previous acquaintance with him was in the form of dry excerpts in annotated editions of Shakespeare. It is one of the books we read to the boys, and it is certainly one of the most popular, being crowded with moving incident and detail which find parallels in the children's own lives.

I don't propose dealing with any other subjects. You will see from the Programme that they are dealt with in the same generous spirit and that we provide "A Liberal Education for all."

I showed the programme of work to a very old friend of mine over seventy years of age. He is a ripe scholar and knows the books. He went through the programmes for a complete school, following each subject throughout the school, very methodically and very carefully, and then after several minutes' reverie murmured: "What a banquet! what a banquet!"

Narration compels the teacher to get at the back of the child's mind. This combined with mutual discussion on a wide range of subjects begets understanding. Understanding begets confidence and love, and all need for corporal punishment and restraint gradually disappears. A teacher who had previously taught in the school called the other day. She exclaimed immediately: "How happy every one is!"

"Do you mean the children?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "and the teachers!"

That was not intended as a compliment to the work, but it was in reality one of the best I have received; for children are only happy when making headway. I made no comment

because I am so afraid of conventional praise that I carefully refrain from “playing up” to any remark.

I also refrain from suggesting to visitors in what directions the scheme is having good effect. A result is

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only established when it thrusts itself on the most casual observer. The Normal Mistress of one of our Northern Training Colleges visited my school last year. She had previously visited a small P.N.E.U. school in Gloucestershire. I was particularly pleased to find out afterwards—that in both schools she found the same generous spirit, and the same freshness in the teachers. In my school in particular, she had noticed that, although many of the children were of the degenerate and criminal type, yet each had confidence in himself and a certain amount of self-respect. She also described our method of conducting prayer, and said she had never felt a more reverent atmosphere, not even in church.

That is what the scheme has done in one of the oldest schools and with some of the poorest and most neglected children of Middlesbrough.

Knowing what a bogey the inspector is to most elementary school teachers I will conclude by quoting the remarks of Mr. H. M. Richards when in the chair at the Tuesday afternoon session at the 25th Annual Conference:

“We are here this afternoon to hear the distinguished Headmaster of a great Public School read a paper by one who believed in the reverend study of great thoughts embodied in great language, the very spirit of that Renaissance from which our great Schools got their impulse and inspiration. It may strike us as a curious fact that the Headmaster of Westminster, one of the leaders of a great profession, should become the willing disciple of one who was not a professional teacher at all. The reason is, I think, that Miss Mason from her own powers of head and heart saw some of the obvious truths which we professional people are often so slow to see. The truth she saw was simply this, that all that is great and beautiful in literature, art, music, and nature can make an appeal not only to the well-to-do, but to the very poorest of our people. It seems so extremely easy to say this, but it required great courage and faith to do it, and I would like on behalf of the Board of Education to make this public acknowledgment of the debt we all owe to Miss Mason, who by her courage and faith brought into the poorest schools of the country and to the most neglected children the opportunity of seeing and feeling and believing in beauty and in truth. There are very few people who, like Miss Mason, can leave behind them such a work and such a message. To those people death has no sting and the grave is only a doorway to continued achievement.”

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<sup>1</sup> Address to the Middlesbrough Head Teachers’ Association.