

Chapter 1 Self-Education

In this chapter, Charlotte Mason expands her metaphor between the living mind and the living body. Of particular importance is the fact that only those things taken into the body (such as air and food) contribute to the health and growth of the body. External adornments, such as jewelry and clothing, are not truly a part of a person. In education, only that knowledge absorbed by the mind feeds the life of the mind. It is for this reason that she underscores the idea that the only real education is self-education. When knowledge is "force-fed," or applied as an external adornment, the mind rejects and does not retain it. Children must come to understand that education is something they must get for themselves, just as they must digest for themselves the food that they eat.

Living Things Grow from What They Take In

A person is not built up from without but from within, that is, he is living, and all external educational appliances and activities which are intended to mould his character are decorative and not vital.

This sounds like a stale truism; but, let us consider a few corollaries of the notion that 'a child is a person' and that a person is, primarily, living. Now no external application is capable of nourishing life or promoting growth; life is sustained on that which is taken in by the organism, not by that which is applied from without.

Perhaps the only allowable analogy with the human mind is the animal body, especially the human body, for it is that which we know most about; the well-worn plant and garden analogy is misleading. The child-garden is an intolerable idea as failing to recognize the essential property of a child, his personality, a property all but absent in a plant. Now, let us consider for a moment the parallel behaviour of body and mind. The body lives by air, grows on food, demands rest, flourishes on a diet wisely various. So, of the mind,—(by which I mean the entire spiritual nature, all that which is not body),—it breathes in air, calls for both activity and rest and flourishes on a wisely varied dietary.

Diet for the body is abundantly considered, but no one pauses to say, "I wonder does the mind need food, too, and regular meals, and what is its proper diet?"

I have asked myself this question and have laboured for fifty years to find the answer, and am anxious to impart what I think I know, but the answer cannot be given in the form of 'Do' this and that, but rather as an invitation to 'Consider' this and that; action follows when we have thought duly.

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The title of this chapter may awaken some undeserved sympathy; gratifying visions of rhythmic movements, independent action, self-expression in various interesting ways, occur to the mind—for surely these things constitute 'self-education'? Most of these modern panacea are desirable and by no means to be neglected; limbs trained to grace and agility, a hand, to dexterity and precision, an eye made to see and an ear to hear, a voice taught to interpret,—we know to-day that all these possibilities of joy in living should be open to every child, and we look forward even too hopefully to the manner of citizen who shall be the outcome of our educational zeal.

Now, although we, of the Parents' Union, have initiated some of these educational outworks and have gladly and gratefully adopted others, yet is our point of view different; we are profoundly sceptical as to the effect of all or any of these activities upon character and conduct. A person is not built up from without but within, that is, he is living, and all external educational appliances and activities which are intended to mould his character are decorative and not vital.

This sounds like a stale truism; but, let us consider a few corollaries of the notion that 'a child is a person,' and that a person is, primarily, living. Now no external application is capable of nourishing life or promoting growth; baths of wine, wrappings of velvet have no effect upon physical life except as they may hinder it; life is sustained on that which is taken in by the organism, not by that which is applied from without.

Perhaps the only allowable analogy with the human mind is the animal body, especially the human body, for it is that which we know most about; the well-worn plant and garden analogy is misleading, especially as regards that tiresome busybody, the gardener, who will direct the inclination of every twig, the position of every leaf; but, even then apart from the gardener, the child-garden is an intolerable idea as failing to recognize the essential property of a child, his personality, a property all but absent in a plant. Now, let us consider for a moment the parallel behaviour of body and mind. The body lives by air, grows on food, demands rest, flourishes on a diet wisely various. So, of the mind,—(by which I mean the entire spiritual nature, all that which is not body),—it breathes in air, calls for both activity and rest and flourishes on a wisely varied dietary.

We go round the house and round the house, but rarely go into the House of Mind; we offer mental gymnastics, but these do not take the place of food, and of that we serve the most meagre rations, no more than that bean a day! Diet for the body is abundantly considered, but no one pauses to say, "I wonder does the mind need food, too, and regular meals, and what is its proper diet?"

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Ideas Are the Proper Food for the Mind

The life of the mind is sustained upon ideas; there is no intellectual vitality in the mind to which ideas are not presented several times, say, every day. Our schools turn out a good many clever young persons, wanting in nothing but initiative, the power of reflection and the sort of moral imagination that enables you to 'put yourself in his place.' These qualities flourish upon a proper diet; and this is not afforded by the ordinary school book, or, in sufficient quantity by the ordinary lesson. I should like to emphasize quantity, which is as important for the mind as the body; both require their 'square meals.'

Knowledge is not sensation, nor is it to be derived through sensation; we feed upon the thoughts of other minds; and thought applied to thought generates thought and we become more thoughtful. No one need invite us to reason, compare, imagine; the mind, like the body, digests its proper food, and it must have the labour of digestion or it ceases to function.

But the children ask for bread and we give them a stone; we give information about objects and events which mind does not attempt to digest but casts out bodily (upon an examination paper?). But let information hang upon a principle, be inspired by an idea, and it is taken with avidity and used in making whatsoever in the spiritual nature stands for tissue in the physical.

"Education," said Lord Haldane [a British philosopher-politician in Charlotte Mason's lifetime], some time ago, "is a matter of the spirit,"—no wiser word has been said on the subject, and yet we persist in applying education from without as a bodily activity or emollient. We begin to see light. No one knoweth the things of a man but the spirit of a man which is in him [I Corinthians 2:11]; therefore, there is no education but self-education, and as soon as a young child begins his education he does so as a student. Our business is to give him mind-stuff, and both quality and quantity are essential. Naturally, each of us possesses this mind-stuff only in limited measure, but we know where to procure it; for the best thought the world possesses is stored in books; we must open books to children, the best books; our own concern is abundant provision and orderly serving.

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The life of the mind is sustained upon ideas; there is no intellectual vitality in the mind to which ideas are not presented several times, say, every day. But 'surely, surely,' as 'Mrs. Proudie' would say, scientific experiments, natural beauty, nature study, rhythmic movements, sensory exercises, are all fertile in ideas? Quite commonly, they are so, as regards ideas of invention and discovery; and even in ideas of art; but for the moment it may be well to consider the ideas that influence life, that is, character and conduct; these, would seem, pass directly from mind to mind, and are neither helped nor hindered by educational outworks. Every child gets many of these ideas by word of mouth, by way of family traditions, proverbial philosophy,—in fact, by what we might call a kind of oral literature. But, when we compare the mind with the body, we perceive that three 'square' meals a day are generally necessary to health, and that a casual diet of ideas is poor and meagre. Our schools turn out a good many clever young persons, wanting in nothing but initiative, the power of reflection and the sort of moral imagination that enables you to 'put yourself in his place.' These qualities flourish upon a proper diet; and this is not afforded by the ordinary school book, or, in sufficient quantity by the ordinary lesson. I should like to emphasize quantity, which is as important for the mind as the body; both require their 'square meals.'

It is no easy matter to give its proper sustenance to the mind; hard things are said of children, that they have 'no brains,' 'a low order of intellect,' and so on; many of us are able to vouch for the fine intelligence by children who are fed with the proper mind-stuff; but teachers do not usually take the trouble to find out what this is. We come dangerously near to what Plato condemns as "that lie of the soul," that corruption of the highest truth, of which Protagoras is guilty in the saying that, "Knowledge is sensation." What else are we saying when we run after educational methods which are purely sensory? Knowledge is not sensation, nor is it to be derived through sensation; we feed upon the thoughts of other minds; and thought applied to thought generates thought and we become more thoughtful. No one need invite us to reason, compare, imagine; the mind, like the body, digests its proper food, and it must have the labour of digestion or it ceases to function.

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I am jealous for the children; every modern educational movement tends to belittle them intellectually; and none more so than a late ingenious attempt to feed normal children with the pap-meat which may (?) be good for the mentally sick: but, "To all wildly popular things comes suddenly and inexorably death, without hope of resurrection." If Mr. Bernard Shaw is right, I need not discuss a certain popular form of 'New Education.' It has been ably said that education should profit by the divorce which is now in progress from psychology on the one hand and sociology on the other; but what if education should use her recovered liberty make a monstrous alliance with pathology?

Various considerations urge upon me a rather distasteful task. It is time I showed my hand and gave some account of work, the principles and practices of which should, I think, be of general use. Like those lepers who feasted at the gates of a famished city, I begin to take shame to myself! I have attempted to unfold (in various volumes [Home Education Series.]) a system of educational theory which seems to me able to meet any rational demand, even that severest criterion set up by Plato; it is able to "run the gauntlet of objections, and is ready to disprove them, not by appeals to opinion, but to absolute truth." Some of it is new, much of it is old. Like the quality of mercy, it is not strained; certainly it is twice blessed, it blesses him that gives and him that takes,* and a sort of radiancy of look distinguishes both scholar and teacher engaged in this manner of education; but there are no startling results to challenge attention.

Professor Bompas Smith remarked in an inaugural address at the University of Manchester that,—"If we can guide our practice by the light of a comprehensive theory we shall widen our experience by attempting tasks which would not otherwise have occurred to us." It is possible to offer the light of such a comprehensive theory, and the result is precisely what the Professor indicates,—a large number of teachers attempt tasks which would not otherwise have occurred to them. One discovers a thing because it is there, and no sane person takes credit to himself for such discovery. On the contrary, he recognizes with King Arthur,—"These jewels, whereupon I chanced Divinely, are for public use." For many years we have had access to a sort of Aladdin's cave which I long to throw open 'for public use.'

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Self-Education Is Possible for All Children

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Children, I think, all children, so taught express themselves in forcible and fluent English and use a copious vocabulary. Parents become interested in the schoolroom work, and find their children 'delightful companions.' Children show delight in books (other than story books) and manifest a genuine love of knowledge. Teachers are relieved from much of the labour of corrections. Children taught according to this method do exceptionally well at any school. It is unnecessary to stimulate these young scholars by marks, prizes, etc.

Children, I think, all children, so taught express themselves in forcible and fluent English and use a copious vocabulary. An unusual degree of nervous stability is attained; also, intellectual occupation seems to make for chastity in thought and life. Parents become interested in the schoolroom work, and find their children 'delightful companions.' Children shew delight in books (other than story books) and manifest a genuine love of knowledge. Teachers are relieved from much of the labour of corrections. Children taught according to this method do exceptionally well at any school. It is unnecessary to stimulate these young scholars by marks, prizes, etc.

After all, it is not a quack medicine I am writing about, though the reader might think so, and there is no IS. I 1/2d. a bottle in question!

Over thirty years ago I published a volume about the home education of children and people wrote asking how those counsels of perfection could be carried out with the aid of the private governess as she then existed; it occurred to me that a series of curricula might be devised embodying sound principles and securing that children should be in a position of less dependence on their teacher than they then were; in other words, that their education should be largely self-education. A sort of correspondence school was set up, the motto of which,—"I am, I can, I ought, I will," has had much effect in throwing children upon the possibilities, capabilities, duties and determining power belonging to them as persons.

"Children are born persons," is the first article of the educational credo in question. The response made by children (ranging in age from six to eighteen) astonished me; though they only shewed the power of attention, the avidity for knowledge, the clearness of thought, the nice discrimination in books, and the ability to deal with many subjects, for which I had given them credit in advance. I need not repeat what I have urged elsewhere on the subject of 'Knowledge' and will only add that anyone may apply a test; let him read to a child of any age from six to ten an account of an incident, graphically and tersely told, and the child will relate what he has heard point by point, though not word for word, and will add delightful original touches; what is more, he will relate the passage months later because he has visualised the scene and appropriated that bit of knowledge. A rhetorical passage, written in 'jurnalese,' makes no impression on him; if a passage be read more than once, he may become letter-perfect, but the spirit, the individuality has gone out of the exercise. An older boy or girl will read one of Bacon's Essays, say, or a passage from De Quincey, and will write or tell it forcibly and with some style, either at the moment or months later. Here on the very surface is the key to that attention, interest, literary style, wide vocabulary, love of books and readiness in speaking, which we all feel should belong to an education that is only begun at school and continued throughout life; these are the things that we all desire, and how to obtain them is some part of the open secret I am labouring to disclose 'for public use.'

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I would have children taught to read before they learn the mechanical arts of reading and writing; and they learn delightfully; they give perfect attention to paragraph or page read to them and are able to relate the matter point by point, in their own words; but they demand classical English and cannot learn to read in this sense upon anything less. They begin their 'schooling' in 'letters' at six, and begin at the same time to learn mechanical reading and writing. A child does not lose by spending a couple of years in acquiring these because he is meanwhile 'reading' the Bible, history, geography, tales, with close attention and a remarkable power of reproduction, or rather, of translation into his own language; he is acquiring a copious vocabulary and the habit of consecutive speech. In a word, he is an educated child from the first, and his power of dealing with books, with several books in the course of a morning's 'school,' increases with his age.

I believe that all children bring with them much capacity which is not recognized by their teachers, chiefly intellectual capacity, (always in advance of motor power), which we are apt to drown in deluges of explanation or dissipate in futile labours in which there is no advance.

People are naturally divided into those who read and think and those who do not read or think; and the business of schools is to see that all their scholars shall belong to the former class; it is worth while to remember that thinking is inseparable from reading which is concerned with the content of a passage and not merely with the printed matter.

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I am anxious to bring a quite successful educational experiment before the public at a moment when we are told on authority that "Education must be . . . an appeal to the spirit if it is to be made interesting." Here is Education which is as interesting and fascinating as a fine art to parents, children and teachers.

During the last thirty years thousands of children educated on these lines have grown up in love with Knowledge and manifesting a 'right judgment in all things' so far as a pretty wide curriculum gives them data.

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But children are not all alike; there is as much difference between them as between men or women; two or three months ago, a small boy, not quite six, came to school (by post); and his record was that he could read anything in five languages, and was now teaching himself the Greek characters, could find his way about the Continental Bradshaw, and was a chubby, vigorous little person. All this the boy brings with him when he comes to school; he is exceptional, of course, just as a man with such accomplishments is exceptional; I believe that all children bring with them much capacity which is not recognized by their teachers, chiefly intellectual capacity, (always in advance of motor power), which we are apt to drown in deluges of explanation or dissipate in futile labours in which there is no advance.

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The children I am speaking of are much occupied with things as well as with books, because 'Education is the Science of Relations,' is the principle which regulates their curriculum; that is, a child goes to school with many aptitudes which he should put into effect. So, he learns a good deal of science, because children have no difficulty in understanding principles, though technical details

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baffle them. He practises various handicrafts that he may know the feel of wood, clay, leather, and the joy of handling tools, that is, that he may establish a due relation with materials. But, always, it is the book, the knowledge, the clay, the bird or blossom, he thinks of, not his own place or his own progress.

I am afraid that some knowledge of the theory we advance is necessary to the open-minded teacher who would give our practices a trial, because every detail of schoolroom work is the outcome of certain principles. For instance, it would be quite easy, without much thought to experiment with our use of books; but in education, as in religion, it is the motive that counts, and the boy who reads his lesson for a 'good mark' becomes word-perfect, but does not know.

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In urging a method of self-education for children in lieu of the vicarious education which prevails, I should like to dwell on the enormous relief to teachers, a self-sacrificing and greatly overburdened class; the difference is just that between driving a horse that is light and a horse that is heavy in hand; the former covers the ground of his own gay will and the driver goes merrily. The teacher who allows his scholars the freedom of the city of books is at liberty to be their guide, philosopher and friend; and is no longer the mere instrument of forcible intellectual feeding.
