**Education is a life**
(by Bruce McNeice)
Hello- I’m Bruce McNeice – a former school Principal, Homeschool Dad, and education consultant. My passion is to impart courage to parents, and to equip and support parents in their God-given role of teaching and training their children to reach their full potential, and live an abundant life.

Charlotte Mason was concerned to provide a ‘liberal education’ through a ‘living curriculum’. She stated, *“The mind of a child is not a sack to be stuffed full of information, but an organism that feasts on ideas from all of life; thus, the child should have a full curriculum to fill his [sic] appetite for knowledge, keeping in mind what subjects, intervals, and recesses are necessary at his [sic] age to produce maximum growth.”*

A child is a living spiritual organism, with a natural appetite for all knowledge. We can't *'make'* a child learn and take in knowledge. It is the natural design of the child's mind to want to know. The child needs intellectual and moral as well as physical sustenance. Because a child's mind naturally feeds on ideas, what children are needing is the 'mind food' that is appropriate for them, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum with lots of 'food for thought'. The disengaged student, however, is the one who is starved of great ideas to ponder. Charlotte Mason suggested using ‘living books’- i.e., real life stories, biographies, primary documents, and classic literature written in a conversational manner - rather than textbooks with morsels of ‘canned bits of information’ (Mason 1918, in Ambleside Online, 2013). Therefore, in our classrooms and home-learning-centres, we provided a smorgasbord of interesting books, things, and ideas to ponder (real food for the mind, rather than facts to memorise) plus real-life experiences where possible. Charlotte had a saying: “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life”

If we provide these three aspects…

i) a positive warm and loving, relaxed atmosphere, (not tense or threatening, or chaotic), and…

ii) we are diligently training in the habits of character needed for success, and…

iii) we feed the life of the child's mind and spirit; providing a smorgasbord of appropriate food for thought (within books and things and real-life experiences).

… then the child cannot help but learn. If these conditions are met, then we can trust the child to take in the mental food appropriate for them.

A Charlotte Mason program provides a suggested list of books, things and activities appropriate for the ages and stages of the child's growth. However, this is only a tool for the parent or teacher who should give themselves permission to divert from the pathway to 'chase a rabbit' (ie., to explore a topic of interest).

The structure provided by routine, regularity and order, is not the enemy of spontaneity. An ordered lifestyle allows room for creative side-tracks, much better than the chaotic lifestyle can. We keep in mind that we use the whole library as our curriculum, and the whole world as our classroom. If a possum comes into the yard or a bird is discovered with its newborn chicks, then be sure to take the opportunity to watch, explore, take photos and sketch the scene, have pleasant discussion and research more on the topic. These situations may briefly disrupt the program, but they can provide valuable 'learning moments' that should not be ignored.

Regarding assessment, we try not to get too bogged down with memorising dry facts for standardised testing. Instead, after each session, the child retells what they have learnt, then within the week they prepare their 'note-booking pages' or creative projects on interesting aspects of the topics explored during the week. Then at the end of the term, they do another type of oral or written narration as an exam essay or a culminating project or assignment. In this way, we are not merely testing to try to trick the child to reveal what they don't know; but rather we are finding out what they do know. Through their note-booking pages or creative projects, we then keep evidence samples as a record of the topics they engaged with and found interesting. This is a much more real and live process of learning and assessment compared with typical standardised testing.

Educators Rothstein et al (2007) claim that *“our current accountability systems distort curriculums by overemphasising basic skills – not because we don't know any better, but because we want accountability on the cheap”* (p. 14). They go on to lament...

*“This is the tragedy of contemporary education policy. Schools – especially those serving disadvantaged students – are creating more time for score-boosting drills in math and reading by reducing time in social studies, physical education, and the arts. The same accountability pressures lead schools to focus on easily tested basic skills in math and reading to the detriment of equally important critical thinking skills.”*

This trend entirely contradicts the recommendations of a range of studies of the world's highest performing school systems and teachers (Clark, 2013; Durvin, 2013; Gatto, 2002; Mourshed, Chijoke, and Barber, 2011; Van Pelt, 2011). The problem with working towards standardised testing, is that it narrows the curriculum, and the teacher will often give in to the pressure to merely 'teach to the test' instead of being concerned for real engaging learning to take place. Of course, you can still use quality, well written textbooks, and occasional workbooks for a specific skill; but never allow the false security of workbooks, textbooks, and standardised testing to get in the way of a broad and generous curriculum based around both the real and imaginary stories of people and places, along with real life experiences, and engaging activities.

Learning is not a curriculum or set of books. Learning is a way of thinking and acting.

“Education is a life”.

In the coming sections, we will learn more about some of the strategies used by the parent or teacher to help the child engage with their learning. Tools and strategies such as …

i) training habits of observation and attentiveness, neat and accurate work, diligence in completing a task, courtesy and consideration of others, co-operation rather than competition, and …

ii) the use of narration, Socratic questioning, discussion, dramatisation, hands-on activities, discovery-learning, and note-booking.

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Before you go – I would like to briefly pray a blessing over you.

Lord God - awesome creator of the universe, you came to set the captives free; and to give us abundant life. So, I ask your blessing over these dear folk as they launch out on their learning journey. Help them to comprehend the breadth and depth of your love for them, and open their eyes to this amazing learning journey in pursuit of all goodness, truth and beauty. Bless them, in Jesus name amen.