**Education is the science of relations.**
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's perspective on learning through 'living books and real things' arises from an understanding of the 'personhood' of the child, and respects the dignity of the child. Having a high view of the child, and his/her ability to consume a generous diet of intellectual food, we trust the child’s mind to absorb what it needs for nourishment in the same way one can trust the body to absorb what it needs from a varied diet. This leads us to Charlotte Mason's theories about how children use the information in books and things to make sense of the world.

Have you ever noticed how inquisitive all young children are? They watch everything you do, and try to copy you and connect with you. The toddler tinkers, and touches, and gets into everything, whether it is good for them or not. The young child has an insatiable desire to know and to make connections. It is almost just as if they are born with questioning feeler-tentacles that have to reach out to everything to make sense of the world. The older pre-schooler asks why incessantly: “Why this Mummy? Why that? How can birds fly? But why?” They begin with a natural insatiable curiosity; and sadly, often within a few years of school, they just don't want to know any more. However, disengagement from learning, is not the normal nature of a child. Children naturally form connections with many things and ideas, if their curiosity is not squashed by fear of getting the answer wrong and looking stupid, fear of the test and being judged, fear of threats and manipulation by over-zealous adults.

The goal of the Charlotte Mason trained educator is to provide the conditions whereby the children can form relations with many things and ideas, people and places. The focus is not on testing knowledge, but on making relations. When they read a story from historical literature and tell back what interested them, they form a relationship with the author, the characters, the events and places and culture of the period. When they study five paintings of an artist over a term, they form a relationship with that artist that stays with them. When they listen to the various music pieces of a famous composer, and read about his life, they form a relationship with the composer such that they will forever recognise his or her music when it is played. When we take time away from the schedule to look at the bird's nest with its chicks, and then the children photograph and sketch and research the questions they have thought up; then that stays with them for a lifetime.

This is quite a different effect from 'cramming for the test, and memorising the stuff' to get a hundred percent, but which is then forgotten a week or a month later. Whereas the child who reads the stories of the people in a particular culture, and who retells the story, and dramatises a scene, who comes up with their own questions which are researched, and then they cook the food of those people, learn a traditional handicraft, and make some of the weapons and tools they would have used – this child then forms real relationships with the people of that time; relationships that may become a life-long interest.

Two specific strategies that parents and teachers can use to facilitate the child to build relations with the object of study are...

i) ‘Masterly inactivity’: ie. Knowing how much to leave the child to do their own learning, and when to come alongside with support; not lecturing or getting too much between child and text or object of learning…

ii) use Socratic questioning: ie., open, non-predictive questioning, that draws out the child’s own thinking and conclusions, making their own relations with the text/author/artwork/thing.

Mason had a constructivist view of education, in that she taught that children have to make their own relations with new knowledge and find connecting links to previously stored knowledge. However, she did not have a constructivist view in the sense of supporting a 'child-centred laissez-faire' situation where the children make all the decisions about what to learn, what literature they would like to read, (or whether they want to read at all) as with some (not all) of the 'natural learning' and 'unschooling' home-schoolers.

Mason taught that a broad spread of carefully chosen resources should be presented; and then, as created and creative beings, children will naturally make connections with a *“number of things, thoughts, and people”.* These connections are enabled through building *“relations to nature, handicrafts, science, art and many living books”*. Mason believed that the student’s act of collecting connections, was self-education at its most enduring. In fact, she said that:
 *“self-education is the only possible education; the rest is mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature...The humane teacher realises that the lesson itself isn't the end. The lesson is merely a scrap of raw material that a child uses to help him speculate about the world. Because of that, a lesson is successful only if it lends itself to reflection and imagination.”* (Mason, 1918, in Ambleside Online, 2013)

Mason's philosophy has been confirmed by recent education research.
*“Crick and Wilson (2005) discuss how...learning is consciously personalised in terms of choice, worth and value to the individual, and its potential to be transformational. The authors argue that this focus is what should be encouraged in schools. Learning becomes an intentional act by the learner who is self-aware and capable of taking responsibility for his or her own learning”* (D.E.E.C.D., 2009, p. 43)

Keamy and Nicholas (2006, in DEECD, 2009) agree.
*“Current research and practice in education...accepts that school students...have the ability to learn in a self-directed way independently of the teacher. All learners, for example, need time to learn through reflecting, absorbing and adapting in order to create understanding and knowledge. All learning may thus be considered to be personalised by the learner”* (p. 45).

In a Charlotte Mason education programme, parents and teachers are trained how to help the students develop vital relationships with many books, ideas, people, places and things; and this becomes a cultural investment that they will build on and use again and again in later life.

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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.