

A SUMMARY OF THE PEDAGOGY OF CHARLOTTE MASON

Introduction

Charlotte Mason was an English educator (1842–1923) who over the course of a long career established a teachers' college and several schools and authored a six-volume work on her new philosophy of education for home and school. She advocated a rich, high-quality, interesting curriculum for all children, not merely to “educate” them, but also to guide them in the development of character and cultivate in them a lifelong love of learning.

At Trinity School we seek to implement many of Mason's insights and ideas. Below you will find a summary of some of her major tenets and techniques and the way that they are implemented in Trinity's program and curriculum.

Five of Mason's Basic Ideas

1. *The child is a full person.*

Mason observed that, though young, children are already full persons. They are made in the image of God, and they are worthy of respect; they are also sinful and thus in need of restraint and guidance. They are created desiring to learn. They are not passive, merely waiting to be filled with information, but are active seekers, eager for ideas.

2. *Education is the “science of relations.”*

By this Mason means that a child wants to be knowledgeably connected to and related to the world, and it is the task of education to enable and foster this.

3. *Children deserve a rich curriculum.*

Mason believed that children can tell good materials from poor ones, and accordingly, she advocated a curriculum that allows children to interact with the best materials available and ones suited to their developmental stage. This includes “living books” (well-written, worthwhile books, the classics of all eras); classics of art, music, and literature; and ample opportunity to interact first-hand with the actual materials of nature and science.

4. *Learning should be teacher-guided and self-directed.*

Mason sought to “fan the flame” of the child's innate curiosity and love of learning. She did not encourage the self-directed learning in which a child creates his or her own curriculum; rather, she planned a wide curriculum, chose materials, and then stood back. She noted, “The function of a teacher is to design learning experiences, not principally to convey information.” Her phrase “masterly inactivity” describes the work of the teacher: lecturing little, not getting between the students and their books, pictures, or science, but remaining immediately available to guide or stimulate the students whenever the need appears.

5. *Atmosphere educates.*

Mason believed that children unavoidably learn from the atmosphere of the home and classroom. Whether we intend it or not, they will detect and learn carefulness or laziness; politeness or disrespect; self-discipline or intemperance. Homes and schools need to intentionally create an atmosphere that encourages and supports the desired character and behavior in our children.

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Mason's Techniques

At Trinity we seek to implement a number of Mason's techniques that make learning more efficient, more effective, and longer-lasting: narration, nature study, picture study, and scheduled free time.

Narration

In narration, the teacher (or the student, if older) reads a selection from an age-appropriate "living book," that is, a well-written book offering a complete, coherent thought from a writer who is knowledgeable about and cares deeply about a subject (a primary source) or who has deeply absorbed the subject from others (secondary source). After this one reading, the class "tells back" or narrates back the selection. This method teaches students to pay careful attention to their material the first time they hear or see it. In the careful observation and in the retelling, they make the material their own. This learning is both time-efficient and effective in terms of long-term retention; it reduces the need for teacher-centric lecturing and increases the opportunities for students themselves to interact with the materials.

Nature study

In nature study, teachers lead students outdoors to observe and/or collect actual specimens. Students later draw or paint the natural items they saw or collected, sometimes creating a "nature notebook" in which to catalog and describe their finds. This type of study is accessible to children both young and old; it relates them to the physical world while developing their powers of observation and creating in them a lifelong appreciation for the flora and fauna in the world around them. This is in contrast to the dry, second-hand, "textbook" science that can seem unrelated to the outside world.

Picture study

In picture studies, the teacher shows students a picture (of a famous painting or photograph, for example) and gives the students a period of time in which to study it. When the time is up, the picture is turned over and students tell back from memory what they remember about the picture. Like in narration, the students sharpen their powers of observation and memory, and in the studying and retelling they make the pictures "their own."

Scheduled free time

Mason insisted that children need “free time” in which to pursue their interests, read, reflect, and simply *play*. In her schools, students spent the morning actively engaged in their subjects, and they devoted their afternoons to nature, music, reading, and play. At Trinity, we seek to build into our schedule the time for children to pursue self-directed learning, with their teacher close at hand to provide direction, stimulation, and support.

Charlotte Mason and the Classical Approach

Mason’s philosophy differs in some significant ways from the more traditional classical approach. In the classical model, students are seen as passive vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, and the main pedagogical method is the lecture, which conveys information from teacher to student. Mason, on the other hand, viewed students as active learners whose natural curiosity and desire to learn is to fostered and encouraged through teacher-guided, self-directed learning. The classical approach centers on learning that respects the three stages of mental development (the Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric stages), while Mason’s philosophy highlights the three realms of education: formal in-school education, formal out-of-school education (such as music or art lessons or organized athletics or clubs), and informal education (learning that takes place around the dinner-table, for example, or during unstructured free time activities).

Both of these approaches are similar, however, in their emphasis on the use of the highest possible quality curricular materials, whether in literature, art, music, history, or science. Neither approach advocates undue acceleration: the classical model holds that students learn best in a program suited to their developmental stage, while Mason believed that children both need and profit from ample, unhurried opportunities to discover things for themselves and develop an enduring love of learning.

Trinity’s educational philosophy seeks to implement the best from both these approaches. We join the classical framework of the Trivium, which respects our students’ stages of development, with Mason’s insights on the child as active, interested, engaged learner, to create an educational program that we believe will lead our students to think clearly and critically for themselves and to develop a lifelong love of learning.

Mason often said, “Education is a life, an atmosphere, a discipline.” In the following chart are

summarized some of the ways that we aim to implement Mason’s philosophy at Trinity School.

Concept	Implementation
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<p>Education is a life, and the food of mental life is ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children are eager to learn and want to learn many things. (They want to be related to God, to people, to things, to ideas.) - Children are discerning learners. - Children are capable of learning for themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer a wide, rich curriculum in art, science and nature, Bible, history, and literature - Make use of nature, outdoor play materials, and especially living books - Use the highest quality materials available - Emphasize the "classics," more original sources, fewer textbooks - Avoid what Mason calls "twaddle" - Use a teacher-guided but self-directed pedagogical approach whenever possible - Less lecturing, more interaction with actual materials provided by the teacher or available on the school grounds
<p>Atmosphere educates.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children learn from their atmosphere, whether it is good or bad. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide an orderly atmosphere that energizes, stimulates, and encourages students - Provide an atmosphere that is neither childish nor overprotective
<p>Education disciplines.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education forms habits in children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop children's powers of attention (through narration) and observation (through nature and picture studies) - Provide an environment that encourages self-control, independent thinking, and listening to and obeying God