



A Method for Educating Human Persons: Not a System

Why is a 'method' of education more important than utilizing a 'system'? In "Home Education," Charlotte Mason says our tendency in educating children is toward a system – which is 'alluring' because it is successful in achieving precise results. But we are educating children, and children are persons, individuals, image-bearers of God, who thrive on relationship. She proposes the idea of a method of education instead.

As she wrote, "a natural, easy, yielding, unobtrusive, simple way of Nature herself; yet, watchful, careful, all pervading, all compelling...with the end of education in view. And method does so with no more tiresome mechanism than the sun employs when it makes the winds to blow and the waters to flow only by shining." Ambleside schools employ CM's philosophy as a method.

First Principle: Excellence in education requires the consistent application of a congruent method that reflects the nature of a child, the nature of knowledge, and the purpose of education.

Method versus System ¹

Never was it more necessary for parents [and teachers] to face for themselves this question of education in all its bearings. Hitherto, children have been brought up upon traditional methods mainly...

That children should be trained to endure hardness, was a principle of the old regime. "I shall never make a sailor if I can't face the wind and rain," said a little fellow of five who was taken out on a bitter night to see a torchlight procession; and, though, shaking with cold, he declined the shelter of a shed. Nowadays, the shed is everything; the children must not be permitted to suffer from fatigue or exposure.

That children should do as they are bid, mind their books, and take pleasure as it offers when nothing stands in the way, sums up the old theory; now, the pleasures of children are apt to be made more account than their duties. Formerly, they were brought up in subjection; now, the elders give place, and the world is made for the children.

English people rarely go so far as the parents of that story in *French Home Life*, who arrived an hour late at a dinner party, because they had been desired by their girl of three to undress and go to bed when she did, and were able to steal away only when the child was asleep. We do not go so far, but that is the direction in which we are now moving; and how far the new theories of education are wise and humane,

the outcome of more widely spread physiological and psychological knowledge, and how far they just pander to child worship to which we are all succumbing, is not a question to be decided off hand.

At any rate, it is not too much to say that a parent [or teacher] who does not follow reasonably a method of education, fully thought out, fails—now, more than ever before—to fulfill the claims his children have upon him.

Method: A Way to an End

Method Implies Two Things

A way to an end, and a step-by-step progress in that way. Further, the following of a method implies an idea, a mental image, of the end of object to be arrived at. What do you propose that education shall affect in and for your child [or students]? Again, method is natural; easy, yielding, unobtrusive, simple as the ways of Nature herself; yet, watchful, careful, all pervading, all compelling. Method, with the *end* of education in view, presses the most unlikely matters into service to bring about that end; but with no more tiresome mechanism than the sun employs when it makes the winds to blow and the waters to flow only by shining.

The parent who sees *his way*—that is, the exact force of method—to educate his child, will make use of every circumstance of the child's life almost without intention on his own part, so easy and spontaneous is a method of education based upon Natural Law. Does the child eat or drink, does he come, or go, or play—all the time he is being educated, though he is as little aware of it as he is of the act of breathing. There is always the danger that a method, a *bona fide* method, should degenerate into a mere system. The *Kindergarten Method*, for instance, deserves the name, as having been conceived and perfected by large hearted educators to aid the many-sided evolution of the living, growing, most complex human being; but what a miserable wooden *system* does it become in the hands of ignorant practitioners!

A System Easier than a Method

A '*system of education*' is an alluring fancy; more so, on some counts, than a *method*, because it is pledged to more definite calculable results. By means of a system, certain developments may be brought about through the observance of given rules. Shorthand, dancing, how to pass examinations, how to become a good accountant, or a woman of society, may all be learned upon systems.

System: the observing of rules until the habit of doing certain things, of behaving in certain ways, is confirmed, and, therefore, the art is acquired—is so successful in achieving precise results, that it is no wonder there should be endless attempts to straighten the whole field of education to the limits of a system.

If a human being were a machine, education could do no more for him than to set him in action in prescribed ways, and the work of the educator would be simply to adopt a good working system or set of systems.

But the educator has to deal with a self-acting, self-developing being, and his business is to guide, and assist in, the production of the latent good in that being, the dissipation of the latent evil, the preparation of the child to take his place in the world *at his best*, with every capacity for good that is in him developed into a power. Though system is a highly useful as an instrument of education, a '*system of education*' is mischievous, as producing only mechanical action instead of the vital growth and movement of a living being.

It is worthwhile to point out the differing characters of a system and a method, because parents [and teachers] let themselves be run away by some plausible 'system,' the object of which is to produce development in one direction—of the muscles, of the memory, of the reasoning faculty—as if the single development were a complete all-round education. This easy satisfaction arises from the sluggishness of human nature, to which any definite scheme is more agreeable than the constant watchfulness, the unforeseen action, called for when the whole of a child's existence is to be used as the means of his education.

But who is sufficient for an education so comprehensive, so incessant? A parent may be willing to undergo any definite labors for his child's sake; but to be always catering to his behoof, always contriving that circumstances shall play upon him for his good, is the part of a god and not of a man! *A reasonable objection enough, if one looks upon education as an endless series of independent efforts, each to be thought out and acted out on the spur of the moment; but the fact is, that a few broad essential principles cover the whole field, and these once fully laid hold of, it is as easy and natural to act upon them as it is to act upon our knowledge of such facts as that fire burns and water flows.* My endeavor in this and the following chapters will be to put these few fundamental principles before you in their practical bearing. Meantime, let us consider one or two preliminary questions.

The Child in the Midst

And first, let us consider where and what the little being is who is entrusted to the care of human parents. A tablet to be written upon? A twig to be bent? Wax to be molded? Very likely; but he is much more—a being belonging to an altogether higher estate than ours; as it were, a prince committed to the fostering care of peasants...

What is peculiar to the children in their nature and estate. "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." "Except ye become as little children ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven." "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" "And He called a little child, and set him in the midst." Here is the Divine estimate of the child's estate. It is worthwhile for parents to ponder every utterance in the Gospels about these children, divesting themselves of the notion that these sayings belong, in the *first place*, to the grown up people who have become as little children.

The Education of a Person²

We take Children as Persons

In the first place, we take children seriously as *persons* like ourselves, only more so; the first question that comes before us is: What do we understand by a person? We believe the thinking, invisible soul and acting, visible body to be one in so intimate a union that "Nor soul helps flesh more now than flesh helps soul."

If the doctrine of the Resurrection had not been revealed to us, it would be a necessity, in however unimagined a form, to our conception of a person. The countenance of our friend with the thousand delicate changes which express every *nuance* of feeling; the refinement, purpose, perception, power, revealed in his hand, the dear familiar carriage, these are all inseparable from our conception of the person...

The Person Wills, and Thinks, and Feels

We believe that the *person* wills and thinks and feels; is always present, though not always aware of himself; is without parts or faculties; whatever he does, *he* does, all of him, whether he take a walk or write a book. It is so much the habit to think of the person as a dual being, flesh and spirit, when he is, in truth, one, that it is necessary to clear our minds on this subject. *The person is one and not several*, and he is no more compact of [compartmentalized into] ideas on the one hand than he is of nervous and muscular tissues on the other. That he requires nutriment of two kinds is no proof that he is two individuals. Pleasant and well-cooked food makes man of a cheerful countenance, and wine gladdens the heart of man, and we all know the spiritual refreshment of a needed meal. On the other hand, we all know the lack-luster eye and pallid countenance of the well-fed who receive none of that other nutriment which we call ideas; quick and living thought is as necessary for the full and happy development of the body as it is for that of the soul...

Education the Science of Relations

We consider that *education is the science of relations*, or, more fully, that education considers what relations are proper to a human being, and in what ways these several relations can best be established; that a human being comes into the world with capacity for many relations; and that we, for our part, have two chief concerns—first, to put him in the way of forming these relations by presenting the right idea at the right time, and by forming the right habit upon the right idea; and, secondly, by not getting in the way and so preventing the establishment of the very relations we seek to form.

Questions to Consider

- What is the difference between a system and a method?
- What are the advantages of “a few broad essential principles” that conform to human nature?
- How do systems and systemic approaches to education distort the formation of right relations (ideas and habits), which are at the heart of education.

¹ Mason, Charlotte, *Home Education* (7-11 excerpts)

² Mason, Charlotte, *School Education* (63-66 excerpts)