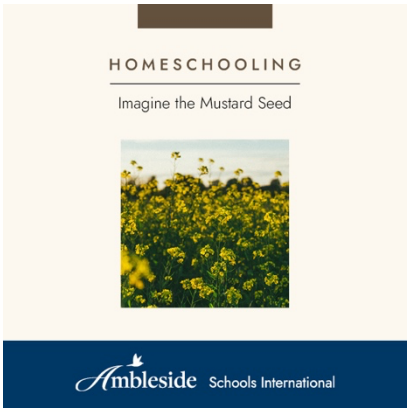

Child Gymnasium or Child Garden

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. [1]

In this passage, taken from the opening pages of her first book, *Home Education*, Charlotte Mason points to two opposite and equal errors in the bringing up or educating of children, errors present in both her time and ours. Let us name these opposite and equal errors that of the child gymnasium and the child garden. Advocates of the child gymnasium envision a high-performance child, an object meticulously shaped and hardened by the strenuous effort of parent, teacher and child. Carefully designed discrete tasks, quantitative performance metrics, and ever-increasing rigor are seen as laying the foundation for victory in a dog-eat-dog, a Darwinian world in which only the strong survive. Advocates of the child garden envision what might be termed the romantic "enthusiasm of childhood, joyous teaching, loving and lovable teachers and happy school hours for the little people." [2] A child's garden, a kindergarten, protected by a glass dome, affording a world of carefree delights in which never a tear is shed nor does sweat come to a brow.

There is much to be said for the romantic vision of the child garden. Indeed, fullness of life requires protection from trauma and joyous engagement with persons and things. For those who have eyes to see, it is easy to recognize the toxicity of the child gymnasium with its better than my peers, performance vision and its potential for cultivating narcissism, loneliness, chronic anxiety and depression. What is often missed, even in some Charlotte Mason circles, is that the child garden is equally capable of producing its share of narcissists, loners, chronically anxious and depressed persons. The error of the child garden is its misplaced confidence in atmosphere alone. It assumes that if a child is placed in a natural, stress-free, beautiful space he or she will naturally rise above the weakness of his nature. What happens is that the child is "left to his nature." Just as a high anxiety, performance orientation is a recipe for narcissism, loneliness, chronic anxiety and depression, so is leaving a child to his nature.

It is true that certain of Charlotte Mason's writings do suggest the child garden. For example, in *Home Education*, she writes:

In this time of extraordinary pressure, educational and social, perhaps a mother's first duty to her children is to secure for them a quiet growing time, a full six years of passive receptive life, the waking part of it spent for the most part out in the fresh air. And this, not for the gain in bodily health alone––body and soul, heart and mind, are nourished with food convenient for them when the children are let alone, let to live without friction and without stimulus amongst happy influences which incline them to be good. [3]

Such passages evoke images of a bucolic childhood, prancing joyfully among fields of daffodils. And, indeed, every child should have her share, even her abundance, of prancing among the daffodils. Flowers and field, bird and beast, freely romping with peers are all part of every child's inheritance, and the child that lacks these is deprived of a good part of what makes life rich and satisfying. But there is more to the story, later in the same book, Miss Mason writes:

The child in the Kindergarten is set to such tasks only as he is competent to perform, and then, whatever he has to do, he is expected to do perfectly. I have seen a four-years-old child blush and look as self-condemned, because he had folded a slip of a paper irregularly, as if found out in a falsehood. But mother or nurse is quite able to secure that the child's small offices are perfectly executed; and, here is an important point, without that slight strain of distressful anxiety which may be observed in children laboring to please that smiling goddess, their 'Kindergarnerin, [their child gardener].'[4]

In our day, few expect a four-year-old to do things perfectly. Partly because we fail to understand the capacities of a child and partly because we fail to understand the meaning of completing things perfectly. When applying the adverb perfectly to the work of a child (or for that matter the work of any human person), we do not mean flawlessly. We do mean to perform a task which (1) is among the child's competencies and (2) is performed in a manner or way that could not be better performed by the child. Let me repeat, when applying the adverb perfectly to the work of a child, we do not mean flawlessly. We do mean to perform a task which (1) is among the child's competencies and (2) is accomplished in a manner or way that could not be better accomplished by the child.

Children have great capacities, often underestimated by adults. Toddlers can learn the joy of putting away toys or helping to bring dishes from the table to the sink, even if it risks the occasional broken dish. And there is some question as to whether a toddler who doesn't learn to put away his toys and help with the dishes will ever learn to joyfully do so. A child's life must be more than simply frolicking. Children should learn the delight of working to the fulness and fruitfulness in which latent capacity is turned into competency.

In the above passage, Charlotte Mason gives two warnings. First, the child should only be left alone to perform tasks which he is competent to perform, and second, there must be no "laboring to please that smiling goddess," be she mother or teacher. When a child is left alone with the expectation of doing that which he or she is not competent to do, the child easily becomes overwhelmed. Similarly, to make the peace, stability and security of the child-adult relationship dependent upon child performance is to dissolve joy into anxiety. We forget that performance anxiety is learned socially. It is born of the fear that if one doesn't perform adequately there will be a rupture in a very important relationship. Such fear takes all the joy out of doing things perfectly and robs hard and careful work of its pleasure. Yet, where the relationship is secure, the parent or teacher is confident that the child can master a task, and adequate support is given; in a relatively short time, the child grows from latent capacity to competency. Having mastered the task, the child is now able to complete the task perfectly, even on her own. In doing so, joy abounds. For turning latent capacity into competency is one of the great joys of life. But this is true only if there is freedom from performance anxiety.

It is essential that parents and teachers clearly understand the relationship between latent capacity and competency.

Latent capacity refers to one's potential to do a thing; be it manage emotional distress well, mend a wounded relationship, clean a room, solve a particular math problem, narrate a text, or experience friendship with God. Depending upon the presence or absence of sufficiently supportive parents, teachers and tribe; these potentialities may or may not be actualized as competency.

Competency refers to the fulfilment of the latent capacity. One can manage emotional distress well, can mend a wounded relationship, can clean a room, can solve a particular math problem, can narrate a text and can experience friendship with God.

In every competency, there are those among us who seem to be naturals. Latent capacity is fulfilled as competency seemingly without effort and with little support. The naturally benevolent child easily mends wounded relationships. The toddler was picking up toys from the time he could walk. A second grader knows all her math facts, apparently without ever giving them any effort or attention. A four-year-old listens delightfully as mom reads a story and retells it with accuracy and vivid detail. The five-year-old's prayer life is a sweet thing to behold. They are competent without effort and with little support. These are the naturals. What is easily forgotten is that the great majority of us are not naturals. For most of us, turning latent capacity into competency requires both personal effort and a supportive teacher.

The chief error of the advocate of the child garden is a misguided trust in what comes natural to a child. The belief is that by placing a child in the right garden, latent capacity will naturally become competency. While this is true for the naturals, it is not true for most of us. All too often, latent capacity fails to become joyful competency, and the child is left in peril of a less than fruitful life with its accompanying narcissism, loneliness, chronic anxiety and depression.

While the advocate of the child gymnasium recognizes that latent capacity must become competency, he misunderstands how to go about it. His conviction is that the autonomous self will grow from weakness to competency if provided the right education and motivated by reward and punishment, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. It's true that such a regimen does work in some cases for some students. It will induce some students to better mastery of math facts or better narration skills, but it is just as likely to provoke a despising of math and a resentment of narration. And, most certainly, such a regime is unable to cultivate a capacity for managing emotional distress or mending a wounded relationship. Further, the cultivated performance orientation will not bode well for long term flourishing, given performance orientation's predisposing one to narcissism, loneliness, chronic anxiety and depression.

What then is required if non-naturals are to be brought up by teachers (both parents and schoolteachers) from latent capacity to joyful competency? Five things:

1. There must be a bonded, joyful, attuned relationship between teacher and student. Moving from latent capacity to competency is a transformation, and all positive human transformation requires the mentorship of a less competent mind by a stronger and wiser mind. Such mind-to-mind mentorship is most potent when both minds know that they belong together (bonded), are glad to be together (joy), and are fully present to each other, attending to each other's mind (attuned).

2. The teacher must possess the necessary competencies. Some of the most important elements of any competency are unconsciously imprinted in the mind of the taught by the mind of the teacher. One does not learn how to return from distress to joy/peace by listening to instruction or reading a book. The instruction or book might prime the learning, but it does not accomplish the learning. One learns how to return from distress to joy/peace by being in a joyful, attuned relationship with someone who competently returns from distress to joy/peace. Similarly, students learn mathematics best by being in a joyful, attuned relationship with someone who competently does mathematics. And it follows that unless a student happens to be a natural, it is unlikely that he will learn mathematics from a teacher who is simply following a script in the teacher's manual.

3. The teacher must be confident in her students' latent capacities. Our students know what we think of them. There is no hiding it. If we believe they can't, they will know it and believe it. In which case, incapacity will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a culture, we are far too quick to ascribe incapacity to those who are slower than peers in acquiring competency. In reaction to our own performance anxiety, we are far too quick to label and diagnose. All too often, the diagnoses become a self-fulfilling prophesy, and the child is forever seen as incapable.

4. Many times, throughout the day, a joyful teacher must wisely support her students by working with them (but not for them) that which they are not competent to do alone. We move from latent capacity to competency, by doing with someone that which he cannot do alone. We know this of physical rehabilitation and athletics, we must come to believe it of mind as well. A teacher asks, "What is six times seven?" "I don't know," responds her student. "What is six times six?" "Thirty-six" "If we add six to thirty-six what would it be?" "Forty-two." "If six sixes are thirty-six, how many are seven sixes?" "Forty-two." "Correct. Close your eyes and see it on the back of your eyelids, six times seven equals forty-two. Open your eyes. How many is six times seven?" "Forty-two." The teacher engages the student briefly at lunch repeating the process, and again as all depart after school. With joyful support, the student can do that which he was not competent to do alone. Over time, latent capacity becomes competency.

5. The teacher must be diligent, day in and day out, but neither anxious nor hurried. Students actualize their latent capacities at different rates. A teacher must not be anxious about this, for we spread our emotions like the flu. The anxious teacher is certain to infect her students, and anxious brains simply do not learn well. One learns to read fluently at four, another five, another six, and some as late as nine. It is only our Darwinian angst which makes us afraid that our student will be left behind. God knows what He is about. Time frame matters little, so long as joy and diligence remain. Neither student nor teacher stay the course for long if it is filled with anxiety. Joy is the antithesis of anxiety. Remember by joy we do not mean parties, roller-coaster rides, Disney movies or other forms of excitement. By joy, we mean the deep feeling that it is good to be me here with you, whether doing the pleasant thing or doing the difficult thing. Though time frame matters little, it is not an excuse for lack of diligence. Daily effort on the part of teacher and student must be vigorously given. There is no more place for the *laissez-aller*, let it all go, they will get it easily and naturally. It may be true that they eventually will. But it is far more probable that without diligence they will not. No child garden for us.

One final note. Assuming one sees the beauty of this highly relational, intentional, growth-oriented approach, what hinders the consistent application of its method? The three most common hindrances are:

1. Application of this method requires that the teacher possesses a very specific set of skills. To sustain a "bonded, joyful, attuned relationship" is an emotional-relational skill that must be developed. Some are more masterful at it, some less. The same can be said of each of the above, up to and including being "diligent, day in and day out, but neither anxious nor time hurried." Few adults come with all the skills needed, but all can grow.

2. There is a natural tendency to go back to Egypt. We all tend to default, particularly when too busy, too stressed or too tired, to that which we have known throughout our lives. For the great majority of us, the default is either the child garden or the child gymnasium.

3. It is impossible to stay fully relational and diligent when one is fatigued. By biological necessity, when fatigued, our capacities to attune and to remain diligent are both marginalized. These take sustained energy. So, we must be well rested, or we will move towards default.

At Ambleside Schools, we find both the child garden and the child gymnasium to be inadequate visions for the formation of children. The joyful bringing up of children from latent capacity to mature competency requires a different vision. It requires a vision of joyfully attuned relationships, teacher competency, confidence in latent student capacities, wise support in doing that which cannot be accomplished alone, and anxiety free diligence on the part of both teacher and parent.

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[1] Mason, Charlotte. *Home Education*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 7.

[2] Mason, Charlotte. *School Education*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 56.

[3] Mason, Charlotte. *Home Education*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 43.

[4] Ibid,180.

*Student Art, Nature Study, Courtesy of Rocky Mountain Christian Academy.