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7-28-2011

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Recommended Citation

Office of University Communications, "Talking “Alternative Education” with Dr. Carroll Smith" (2011). *Gardner-Webb NewsCenter Archive*. 2058.
<https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/gardner-webb-newscenter-archive/2058>

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Talking "Alternative Education" with Dr. Carroll Smith

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Office of University Communications

July 28, 2011

 Carroll Smith

Dr. Carroll Smith, professor of education at Gardner-Webb University, is a champion of the Charlotte Mason education movement, an alternative approach to education based on the ideas of the British educationalist

Charlotte Mason (1842-1923). Mason believed that education is about more than communicating isolated facts; rather, education is about inspiring students to understand their relationship with the living world around them and to engage actively in that world. At this point, Smith calls the movement a "grassroots level" phenomenon. But if the attendance for this summer's seventh annual Charlotte Mason education conference at Gardner-Webb was any indication, the "grassroots" movement is spreading like crabgrass.

More than 180 homeschool, private school, charter school and public school teachers traveled from all over the U.S. and Canada to Boiling Springs to explore how Mason's theories constitute "a true alternative" to other current models of education. During the four-day event, participants enjoyed presentations with titles like, "The Two Towers—Paradigms at War in Middle Earth," "Wonder and Admiration...Living Science," and "Inspiring Heroism and Claiming Magnanimity: What Mason said about Citizenship." They engaged in discussions and immersion groups led by Mason experts, education scholars, and experienced teachers from every level and arena. Smith, the conference's organizer, called the event a resounding success.

Smith has taught at a Charlotte Mason school, and has devoted his life to studying and developing curricula based on her theories. Recently, he sat down with a Gardner-Webb writer to discuss his understanding of the Charlotte Mason model, and his vision for what education can and should be.

GW: This summer's conference was titled "A Charlotte Mason Education—A True Alternative." How does Charlotte Mason offer an alternative to the mainstream model of education?

CS: For Mason, the bottom line is that education is about relationship. It's not just about learning facts from a book. It's not just about learning the facts about chemistry, for example. It's about how I relate to the world of chemistry, and how chemistry helps me relate to the world around me. Her whole premise for science is very interesting in light of our materialistic culture—meaning a culture that is built on all of life being only matter. For her, the beginning of science instruction was best done through nature study. She believed kids should develop a relationship with the natural world around them, and should

understand how they fit into that world. They would learn about the first birds that came back in the spring, or the first flowers that bloomed. They would have such a relationship with the nature around them that they'd be very unlikely to view nature from a purely utilitarian perspective.

GW: I understand that citizenship seems to be a key aspect of the Mason approach to education. There were several presentation titles devoted to the idea of citizenship. Does this idea of the centrality of relationships contribute to Mason's emphasis on citizenship? In other words, does it help students better understand how to relate to one another?

CS: Yes, and citizenship is only one aspect of Mason's holistic approach to education. Most teachers now agree that the best way to teach concepts is to develop units. You might put together a unit, for example, on the Civil War. Well, in the 1800s Mason had already moved beyond that concept and she took that idea a step further, and said that all the subjects we teach need to be presented as interrelated with one another. She said history was the pivot of the curriculum, so she started at the beginning of history and sequentially moved forward, studying the citizenship, literature, art, and even science of the time as she moved forward. That way, students were introduced to ideas in their proper contexts, instead of being stuffed full of facts divorced from their contexts. Citizenship is one aspect of that. Students study great citizens of the time periods, and discover what those people can teach them about being good citizens today. This is important because when our worldviews begin with the idea of relationships, our lifestyles are less likely to result in domination or exploitation. Perceiving the right relationships between parts of a whole, or between members of a community, helps us become better citizens of that community.

GW: What do relationships between teachers and students look like in the Mason model?

CS: Mason began with the idea that the child is a born person, a person with the ability to change and relate. If there is a bottom line in her educational philosophy, this is really it. A teacher's job, then, is to come to know and understand the student as a person, and try to motivate them to engage outwardly with the world of living ideas. Mason believed that the teacher was to be a facilitator between the student and the ideas found in living books, instead of the source of everything the students learn. That way, the teacher wouldn't hold students back, but would encourage them to feast on the banquet of ideas before them. Personhood also requires the narrative or story. The stories of history set the context and relationships that children need in order to use their best memory system (visual-spatial) for learning. And, relationship in its many ramifications is also the basis for motivation rather than grades or some other rewards. Teachers in this educational model then don't try to control students through rewards and punishment but mentor students towards right living.

GW: Would you describe the Mason curriculum itself?

CS: One of the predominant contemporary approaches to education is to strip everything down to its smallest component parts, memorize those various parts, and then try to reconstruct a whole. But, as one scholar has argued, when we break down a whole, like water, into its component parts, we get something that burns—hydrogen—and something that facilitates burning—oxygen. By starting from oxygen and hydrogen, it would be very difficult to work up to an understanding of the whole, water, which has a different and quite opposite character of its component parts. In the Mason curriculum, we start with the whole, and we try to never lose sight of that whole even as we examine the ways the various parts interrelate to form that whole.

GW: So what does that look like practically?

CS: We do a lot of nature study, to get students outside of a miniaturized classroom and introduce them to how they fit into the greater world around them. We also do not allow textbooks. Mason suggested that we use what she called “living books.” Instead of books designed to fill students with stuffy facts, living books are written by people who love the topic, and they present material in the form of a living narrative. As the children read, they pick up a love for that topic, and they can understand how all the concepts fit together into a larger story, into a context.

GW: In your own study of Mason, where will you go from here?

CS: I’m actually going back to Scripture—because that’s where she went—to examine what Mason meant when she said the child is a born person. It seems to me that, if we are created in the image of God, in the image of the Trinity, then we are relational beings by our very nature. That is why children need relationships to thrive, and why they have to learn facts in the context of stories, or narratives. They need to see the connections, and the relationships between ideas. I am excited to examine it. I think this little old lady—a short, tiny little lady up in the Lake District of England—figured out a heck of a lot.