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William Wordsworth, Charlotte Mason and contemporary primary school education

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ABSTRACT

The hundredth anniversary of the death of a once famous educator, Charlotte Mason, has stimulated renewed interest and research in her philosophy and her practice in primary education, particularly since this was based on the enjoyment, interests and self-motivation of young children. This paper traces the influence of educational ideas in the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850). On the philosophy of nineteenth-century educator, Charlotte Mason (1842–1823). First, there are brief biographies of Wordsworth and Mason. Then the paper explores similarities in their refreshing ideas about the nature of childhood, how children learn, learning outdoors, the need for children to have time to explore independently and the importance of a rich vocabulary and good literature. Many of their beliefs are still threatened by rigid curricula, frequent testing and inspections to enforce compliance, which they contested. In conclusion, examples are given of current practice illustrating how the philosophy of Wordsworth and Mason is relevant and how it can be interpreted today.

KEYWORDS

Charlotte Mason; William Wordsworth; educational philosophy; early childhood education; qualities of childhood; learning outdoors

Brief biography of William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth, the famous English Romantic poet was born in Cumberland (now Cumbria), a scenic region in the north of England. He attended Hawkshead School and St. John's College Cambridge before spending 1791–1792 in France. He was initially enchanted by the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity, which inspired the French Revolution but later, appalled by its violence, he returned to England. In 1799 he and his sister Dorothy settled permanently in the village of Grasmere, in Cumbria.

Wordsworth saw his poetry as educational. During the nineteenth century a connection was made between Wordsworth's innovative poetic thrust and the vast new nineteenth-century interest in education. Wordsworth's writing makes clear that his poetry is to be taken as didactic. 'There is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment or law of thought of our intellectual constitution' (letter to Lady Beaumont (George 2018)). He became involved in the relationship between poetry and education through politics. Wordsworth's letter to the Bishop of Llandaff in 1793 attacked the ill effects of the existing system of education, as does his support of London dissenters at this time, who instructed the lower-middle and lower classes to be obedient to the ruling classes. Mishiro (2001) says that Wordsworth was also influenced by Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791/2008) and William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Godwin 1793/2013). Wordsworth's interest in education may also be as a result of helping

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his sister Dorothy to care for Basil, the two-year-old son of his friend Montagu, in 1795 and of Dorothy's interest in Rousseau's *Emile*.

Brief biography of Charlotte Mason

Less is known of Charlotte Mason, probably because her writing is piecemeal and Victorian in style. But in a recently published biography Combs (2015) researched her life in previously unknown detail. Her philosophy of education arose from her practice, which she describes in the six volumes of her *Home Education Series* (1886, 1897/2017, 1905/2017, 1905/2017, 1925/2020) reprinted in 2017. In volume 3 Mason quotes several of Wordsworth's poems at length, evidence that she was much influenced by him.

Mason's interest in education seems to have begun when she began work, aged 12 as a pupil teacher. She was then awarded a scholarship to the progressive Home and Colonial Training Institution, where there was an emphasis on learning from nature, from 'things' and from the senses. She spent the next 12 years in an Infant School in Worthing but avoided teaching the restrictive Revised Code of Education, introduced in (1862), by taking a position as 'senior governess' at the first 'gentlewoman's training college' in Chichester. This was followed by a move to Bradford, where she became involved in parent education. She gave lectures on the importance of engaging interest, on a wide and flexible curriculum, outdoor education, imaginative play, education through self-discovery and empirical observation in botany and the arts. The lectures brought new friends, including bishops, members of the aristocracy and wealthy industrialists. To provide an income for this work the Parents' Review School was launched in 1891, providing a home-school curriculum for the upper classes. This led to the foundation of the Parents' National Education Union (PNEU), which established Mason's methods of home education worldwide, through books sent to parents abroad. Finally, income from the PNEU allowed Mason to buy a large eighteenth-century house in Ambleside which she named Scale How and in 1895 the first staff and students moved in. Mason managed her innovative training college until her death in 1923.

Similar educational philosophies of Wordsworth and Mason

The nature of childhood: Wordsworth

In *Tintern Abbey* and in *Ode to Immortality* Wordsworth describes childhood as a time of innocence and says that wonder and memories of childhood and nature work on the emotions and perceptions in adulthood and will provide future memories. He sees childhood as a unique stage in development. In the *Ode*, he reflects on the loss of the innocence and joy he had experienced in his early years and of his longing for the return of the visionary 'gleam of early childhood'. He remembers how, as a child, the smallest flower could have a deep emotional impact on him. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth remembers his childhood, bathing naked in the river and climbing trees to rob nests. In this way, he says that nature develops morality in the child by stressing his reaction to the way he had treated nature (robbing birds' nests). Similarly, in *The Prelude* Book 1 he describes what he imagined, along the lake where he had stolen a boat. A peak reared up and menaced him for his misdemeanour. Later in *The Prelude* he describes how he would like to be outdoors all the time for nature to educate him and he describes his joy of his unsupervised outdoor activities with his schoolfriends on the ice, climbing in the snow, then playing cards around a peat fire.

The nature of childhood: Mason

Mason accepted Wordsworth's notion that childhood is a unique stage of development, that children should be involved in 'active learning' and learn to observe with precision. Wordsworth, she says, only hints at the glory that might be revealed in childhood by their intellects. She writes of

the astonishingly alert minds of children and the intellectual effort of the first years of life (Vol. 6, pp. 68–69) and says that reason is present in the mind of children as truly as imagination (Vol. 6, pp. 68–70). Perhaps unlike Wordsworth, she understood that children are not always ‘good’. ‘Children are not born bad but with possibilities for good and for evil’ (Vol. 6, p. 81). She wrote that the life of the mind grows on ideas, ‘which are held in a thought environment which surrounds the child, inspired by the life around him as an atmosphere ... events and images ...’ and which grow as a seed. ‘Ideas alone matter in education’, Mason wrote (Vol. 2, p. 39).

In Vol. 2, pp. 191–194, Mason endorses Wordsworth’s claim that the ability to observe scenes in nature can be drawn on and sustained in other circumstances in the future. She quotes his poem, *Tintern Abbey*, where he says that, years after visiting the Abbey, he can see it in his mind’s eye and is both calmed and gladdened again by the sounds of the river Wye, of the birds and cattle and insects, the smell of the meadowsweet and the coolness of the grass, sensed as clearly as when he was there. Mason argues that we should encourage children to look and smell and fill their memories with open-air images capable of giving the sensations of extreme delight which they can draw on in the future. She says mothers must develop in children the ability to observe, describe and so remember their recollections of nature, through sight-seeing and painting in the country, through nature diaries and through learning the names of wildflowers and how they grow and observing how different trees change throughout the year. Children should learn to watch wild animals and insects and learn reverence for life and a sense of beauty so that they can remember them in other times.

How children learn: Wordsworth

For Wordsworth, education must be self-education. In *The Prelude* (Book 5) he says that a child should be put in the way of such knowledge as will lead him out of himself. This requires freedom from distraction and officious interference. Muirhead, writing in (1904), wrote that teachers should follow Wordsworth’s example and ‘keep their heads and believe in themselves, which requires the antithesis of the timetables, drill and pressure’. ‘Those who share Wordsworth’s views’, Muirhead said, ‘should have the courage to take them to their professional and parental lives’. Wordsworth believed that education is a process of natural growth and that the teacher should be a watchful guide, like a gardener, not a ‘sage on the stage’. Mamun (2018) argues that Wordsworth made a distinction between education and instruction and that he advocated a poetic education of receptive and creative imagination rooted in poetry as a corrective to passive learning and reading.

How children learn: Mason

Although other Victorian writers were influenced by Wordsworth’s views on education no-one, it seems, put them into practice as Mason did and Mason is significant. It has been argued that she has ‘a place in the pantheon of educational theorists, from Plato to the social constructivists’ (Cooper 2023).

Mason recognised that Wordsworth’s concept of childhood was based on his recollection of his own early years. ‘We have the idea that poets say more than we know and therefore may take Wordsworth as a witness ... the most prosaic of us comes across evidence of the mind in children ... as astonishingly alert’ (Vol. 6, p. 68). Like Wordsworth Mason was committed to rethinking education. She also thought that education must be self-education (Vol. 6. Book 1). She believed that children are ‘persons’ (Vol. 6, p. 23) who have a natural hunger for learning and learn through imagination, thought and reasoning, based on their experiences, not directly from teachers (Vol. 6, pp. 123–1215). She emphasised ‘living ideas’ and learning as an active process, building on prior knowledge. Like Wordsworth she saw the role of the teacher as providing children with rich experiences, then facilitating and guiding their learning. She thought that children do not need extrinsic rewards to

be motivated to learn. She said that marks, prizes and the like eliminate that knowledge-hunger, itself a quite sufficient incentive to education (Vol. 6, p. 47). Mason did not think that knowledge is transferred from teacher to learner but that learning is centred on the conscious needs of the individual and that for young children's senses, feelings and the natural environment are important. She said that the mind is not 'a sac to hold ideas' but has an appetite for all kinds of knowledge which it can digest and assimilate. (Vol. 6, Principle xxx, p. 9). The mind concerns itself only with thoughts, imaginations, reasoned arguments; it declines to assimilate the facts out of meaningful contexts. In the passive attitude of a listener, a child is 'bored by the discursive twaddle of the talking teacher' (Vol. 6, pp. 123–15).

Importance of learning outdoors: Wordsworth

Wordsworth saw nature as an educator in complex ways: as a source of joy, soothing, knowledge, spirituality and healing. He saw it as something to observe and not to interfere with and preferred to commune with nature, rather than with society. For example, in Lines Written in the Early Spring, he describes the joy he is feeling surrounded by primroses, periwinkles and birds and how this gives him 'reason to lament what man has made of man'. He sees nature as a good teacher because it 'sparks the passions that build our human soul', (The Prelude, book 1) and guides our explanation of these passions.

The importance of learning outdoors: Mason

Mason too thought that intimacy with nature makes for personal well-being and that if implanted early it will enrich their children's lives and seem to have been born in them (Home Series Vol. 1 p. 710). She says that 'The person who watches nature closely and knows her well, like the poet Wordsworth ... has his beauty sense always active, always bringing him joy' (Vol. 4, p. 42). She wrote at length about the importance of learning outdoors in Vol. 1, pp. 56–92. She writes about the importance of learning to observe weather, seasons the habits of bees, ants, wasps, spiders, caterpillars, dragonflies, birds, wildflowers, trees, in town or country. Through this children develop a sense of beauty, of the sublime and reverence for life. Mason encouraged children to record observations in order to develop careful observation.

While he is five or six, he should begin to illustrate his notes freely with brush drawings ... after learning basic colour-mixing his painting and drawing should be left to his own initiative. A child of six will produce a dandelion, a poppy, daisy, iris with its leaves, impelled by the desire to reproduce what he sees with surprising vigour and correctness (Vol. 1, p. 55)

Mason also expected her student teachers to do this and exquisite examples can be found in the Armit Library in Ambleside.

Wise passiveness': time for reflection, curiosity, experiment, discussion, play, fun: Wordsworth

In his ballad, Expostulation and Reply, when Wordsworth is asked why he sits all day, dreaming on a stone by Esthwaite Lake, he imagines a conversation of his boyhood self with his school master who thinks that books are the only way of gaining philosophical wisdom.

Wordsworth replies,

The eye can't choose not to see.

We cannot bid the ear be still.

Think you by all this mighty sum.

Of things for ever speaking.

That nothing of itself will come.

But we must still be seeking?

-Then ask not wherefore, here alone,

I sit upon this old grey stone.

And dream my time away’.

Wise passiveness: Mason

Mason develops Wordsworth’s concept of ‘wise passiveness’ (Vol. 3, pp. 28–35). In Mason’s context this means accepting that adults are in authority but children are free within that authority. Teachers and parents are confident in their children, good humoured, serene and do not interfere too much.

A love of literature: Wordsworth

Wordsworth discovered the delight of great books and describes his enthusiasm in discovering literature and reading avidly beside the River Derwent during school holidays.

‘When first I learnt that this dear prize of mine
Was but a block hewn from a mighty quarry-
That there were four large volumes – laden all.
With kindred matter, t’was to me in truth.
A promise scarcely earthly ...’

A love of literature: Mason

Mason (Vol. 3, p. 197) quotes at length from *The Prelude* Book 5. She enjoyed reading about how Wordsworth discovered books. She recommended that children should have access to the very best minds and literature. In Vol. 6, p. 48 she wrote,

We owe it to every child to put him in communication with great minds that he may get at great thoughts; with the minds, that is, of those who have left us great works. Children should read worthy books, many worthy books.

Mason (Vol. 3, p. 198) also delighted in – or perhaps was inspired by the romance of literature which Wordsworth describes in the *Prelude* book 5, which she quotes.

‘In Araby romances; legends penned
For solace by dim light of monkish lamps;
Fictions for ladies of their love devised.
By youthful squires, adventures endless spun,
By the dismantled warrior in old age ...’
Mason thought that children should ‘range at will among books’.

A love of words: Wordsworth

Mason quotes Wordsworth’s love of words, ‘a passion and a power’ (Vol. 3, p. 199).

‘Twice five years

Or less I might have seen, when first my mind
With conscious pleasure opened to the charm.
of words on timeful order, found them sweet.
For their own sakes, a passion and a power;
And phrases pleased me chosen for delight.
For pomp or love’

A love of words: Mason

Mason too encouraged children to delight in words. In Vol. 2, p. 226 she attached importance to using sophisticated concepts rather than ‘baby language’. She gave an example of a young child who was familiar with sophisticated vocabulary. He told his grandmother about his visit to a railway station. She asked him if he had seen a ‘puff-puff’. ‘No grandmama’, he replied. ‘I saw a locomotive’.

The Ideas of Wordsworth and Mason remain significant today

Active learning

Wordsworth and Mason believed that learning should be active and driven by curiosity and build upon previous experience. This requires time and limited direct interference from adults. These ideas precede those of the constructivist theorists. For example, J.S. Bruner (1966) thought that early learning should be through enactive experiences (examining physical objects) and iconic (visual) experiences, and that problems arising must involve reasoning and imagination and a degree of uncertainty. Mason, like Bruner, thought that children should learn the principles of a discipline and Mason, like Vygotsky (1962) emphasised the importance of concept development, grouping things into categories and sub-categories, particularly in terms of plants. She saw this as the most important of intellectual achievements (Vol. 1, p. 64). Many teachers today would love to base their teaching on rich experiences, investigation and discussion but feel overburdened national curricula which are detailed, prescriptive and tested.

Learning outdoors: current research

Findings about the importance of learning outdoors are very relevant to young children. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOC) states that opportunities for children to access the natural environment are diminishing, due to parental worries about safety and reduced amounts of open green spaces, while technology has increased children’s sedentary time. For these reasons, schools have a great responsibility to give children access to nature and teachers felt it improved their job satisfaction. However, the Council said that schools did not teach outdoors as often as they would like because the narrow assessment measurements that schools are judged by conflicts with the wider benefits of outdoor learning. The research of the CLOC advises that one or two hours of outdoor learning a week, which does not follow a rigid classroom format, ‘engages children where they don’t feel you’re actually learning, just going on an adventure and that teachers felt like people, not like the robots they were expected to be’. Similarly, the English Outdoor Council found that exposure to the natural environment enhanced personal and social communication skills, physical, mental and spiritual health, spiritual, sensory and aesthetic awareness, the ability to assert personal control and increased sensitivity to one’s own well-being. Research undertaken by the Natural Medicine Journal (Solomonian et al. 2022) investigating the effects of nature-based education, similarly, found that learning in an outdoor setting increased intellectual development, academic motivation, psychological and affective well-being.

Learning outdoors: vignettes from current practice

One example of outdoor learning is a nursery school in rural Cumbria which had an annual one-day camp, complete with pod tents in a field belonging to a school governor. This included gathering, naming, grouping wildflowers (the field was about to be mowed), picnic lunches, an afternoon sleep and free exploration, a bear hunt, chanting the eponymous poem as different challenges were overcome, and finding a teddy already in his tent at the top of the hill (Cooper 2023).

Another example is a curricular topic on Tudor Exploration and Settlement (Agar 2009). The focus throughout was on understanding others. The class made their way, on a very cold and rainy afternoon, down the farm path opposite the school until all they could see was hills, grass and trees, with no sign of habitation. The children were told that they had just landed in America. They discussed what they would need to do to provide themselves with shelter, warmth and food in the immediate and the longer term, using only the resources they could see, or knew could be found there. This engaged their imagination and, back in a warm school they enthusiastically discussed the Tudor people who chose to emigrate and settle in Roanoke, their reasons for emigrating and questions of religious intolerance, the initial generosity of the Roanoke people and possible reasons why their feelings changed.

Planning and organisation

A different example demonstrates how a school on a small estate in South London managed their grounds to provide maximum opportunities for linking their learning to the outdoors – and vice-versa. A ‘pet shed’, managed by the children, housed different varieties of chickens and ducks and a rabbit run. This involved the opportunity to learn responsibility and respect learning and the opportunity for recording in many different art media and in different kinds of writing throughout the year. There was a pond with water creatures and plants a school garden, bird tables, a wild area with trees and wildflowers and a large wooden structure built by the parents, which might become whatever the current play idea was. In the Summer many of the lessons, discussion, drama and reading opportunities, were pleasantly spent under the trees.

Observation and nature diaries

This leads to the importance of nature diaries for regular observation and recording. Mansfield (2023) has written about the nature notebooks written by Mason’s students. The analysis in this monograph demonstrates that far from being simplistic records of natural history observation, the diaries provided the students with transferable skills and underpinning knowledge. A range of learning styles was employed including experiential learning, reflective and reflexive approaches through synchronous and asynchronous activity. These provided deep learning opportunities for students through lowering cognitive load. Transferable skills focused on observation, application of the scientific method and the development of accuracy and precision, were practiced regularly.

Mansfield then gives:

A critical analysis of the contemporary value of nature diaries today as both a vehicle for learning and for scientific validity. It then reviews a range of contemporary field note systems and finally, provides practical guidance for each of the notebook styles discussed.

‘Wise passiveness’

Mason recognises the importance of Wordsworth’s concept of ‘wise passiveness’ which he introduced in *Expostulation and Reply*, in the *Lyrical Ballads*; ‘We can feel this mind of ours in wise passiveness’ (line 24). Wordsworth is urged by his ‘friend Matthew’, to stop sitting and daydreaming and read books. Despite his love of books Wordsworth questions the idea that we must always be

seeking knowledge, saying that consciously or not, in wise passiveness we are responding to nature and the world around us which feeds our minds. There is much emphasis today on 'getting through' the curriculum, passing the test, constant pressure and competition. In reaction to this, some schools attempt to teach 'mindfulness' to bring a gentle accepting attitude to the present moment, to help develop focus, curiosity, empathy and being in the present moment. Mindfulness is said to promote happiness and relieve stress and anxiety. However, Wordsworth thought that through 'wise passivity' observing nature stimulated the mind spontaneously. This process was evident in the school grounds mentioned above.

There are numerous books offering ideas for teaching the primary curriculum outdoors. Two recent examples are Sefton (2020) and Bushnell et al. (2020).

Love of literature: research

The Sunday Times (23.01.22) under the title, 'Pupils Starting Secondary School with a Reading Age of Six', states that education experts and campaigners are warning of a reading crisis in British Schools and that government figures published in 2021 showed that one in five 11-year-olds did not reach the expected standard. The National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance emphasises that literacy is about far more than the ability to read. It lists the many reasons why, beginning with 'they stimulate children's sensory awareness on an imagined level, inform imagination and inspire creativity'. (<https://thencbla.org/advocacy/why-do-kids-need-books/>).

Rose (2021) has written a riveting book on the importance of story and how we bond imaginatively with the characters.

Love of literature: practice

The novelist, Penelope Lively was educated by her nanny in Cairo during World War 11 using Charlotte Mason's curriculum and books sent from England. She describes how, aged 11, she enjoyed Greek mythology (Lively 2006).

I would usurp other parts, wallowing in vicarious experience, hidden away in the hammock of creepers. I would re-enact it all, amending the script, starring in every episode. I was Helen, languishing in the arms of Paris. I was Achilles, nobly dying. I was Nausivaa, nude and distinctly sexy on the beach. The erotic overtones had not escaped on me, or rather they had reached mysterious levels of my own nature ...

When, aged 12, Penelope Lively went to her first school in England she found the other adolescents held reading in contempt. One of the punishments was to be sent for an hour in the library and report back what had been read. Her copy of the Oxford Book of English Verse was confiscated by matron. Sent to the headmistress she was told, 'There is no need to read this sort of thing in your spare time Penelope. You will be *taught* that'.

Love of words

Wordsworth and Mason knew that children love words. One four-year-old, in an inner city London school was interested in the collection of seaweed the teacher brought back from the sea-side. 'BLADDERWRACK!' he announced proudly, waving a piece in front of the headteacher. 'Don't they say some funny things', she smiled. What would Miss Mason have said?

Summary

This paper explored similarities between the educational ideas of William Wordsworth and Charlotte Mason, who had both been very critical of the educational approaches of their times. It concluded with examples of recent research and practice which emphasise the relevance today of each of the aspects of the educational philosophy of Wordsworth and Mason which was discussed in the paper.

Post Scriptum. Maybe *A Kestrel for a Knave* (Hines 2016) is a briefer and more abrasive interpretation of learning through nature.

Disclosure statement

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