

## Introducing Charlotte Mason's Use of Narration

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### Abstract

This article makes the claim that as public policy is made about very young children particularly in an educational setting, oracy needs to be strongly considered because of the implications it has on future reading development. The author reviews some of the research literature on oral language development and its impact on reading in school. Following this review and after making a connection among intellect, language and environment the British educationalist Charlotte Mason is introduced. Reviewing narration as an instructional strategy, the author explores the usefulness of narration and its effects on learning. Brown and Cambourne claim that narrating has many advantages for the learner. After discussing these advantages the author suggests ways to disseminate knowledge of the research on oral language and narration to those who work with our very young children.

### Introduction

Research continues to support the need for conscious and sustained language development in children at a very early age.<sup>1</sup> Some of this research even implies that the language use of a two year old is an indicator of how well that age child will read in later graders. Further, research seems to indicate that the more developed a child's use of language, the better he or she will do in life. This indicates clearly the importance of language development not only in young children but also in very young children. This article, then, discusses some background information on the need for sustained language development in very young children and then introduces the reader to educationalist Charlotte Mason and discusses her use of narration. Finally, it ends with some suggestions toward improving the language development of very young children, with the aim of impacting their reading abilities later in elementary school. Although I do not mention disadvantaged children consistently throughout the article, the intent is to help those who are involved in making public policy and those who work with children see the importance of language development in very young children especially in underprivileged children.

One of the staples of Mason's educational methodology is narration or retelling. These two words are used today to convey approximately the same idea. While Brown and Cambourne and others refer to narration as retelling,<sup>2</sup> I use the words synonymously.

### Research on Oral Language

In their research on the connection between reading problems and early language development, Olofsson and Niedersøe (1999) write, "There is a significant connection between early language measures and reading skills in the first four school years, and language awareness is involved, but the relationship is much stronger after the onset of reading instruction. Language

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<sup>1</sup> P.H. Cooper and others, "The Contribution of Oral Language Skills to the Development of Phonological Awareness." *Applied Psycholinguistics* 23, (2002): 399-416; A. Olofsson and J. Niedersøe, "Early Language Development and Kindergarten Phonological Awareness as Predictors of Reading Problems: From 3 to 11 Years of Age." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 32, (1999): 464-472; Hollis S. Scarborough, "Very Early Language Deficits in Dyslexic Children." *Child Development* 61, (1990): 1728-1743; J. Wise and others, "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities." *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 50, (2007): 1093-1109.

<sup>2</sup> Hazel Brown and Brian Cambourne, *Read and Retell* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997); Y. Goodman, "Retelling of Literature and the Comprehension Process," *Theory Into Practice* 21, no. 4: 301-307

development may form the basis for reading acquisition, but reading itself seems to be a specific and coherent skill.”<sup>3</sup>

If early language development is crucial to later reading development, it is interesting to note Dr. Frederick Zimmerman’s study on the use of “infant videos” with children under age 2.<sup>4</sup> Although Disney took quite an exception to this piece of research<sup>5</sup>, it might behoove us to notice that, according to Zimmerman, infants who spend a lot of time in front of a video do not have a vocabulary as large as those who spend less time in front of ‘baby videos.’<sup>6</sup> Further, in another research project by Wise, Sevcik, Morris, Lovett and Wolf (2007) the authors suggest that

Keeping the study’s limitations in consideration, the findings from this study were largely consistent with a large body of research indicating that oral language skills are related to reading achievement (Cooper et al., 2002; Olofsson & Niedersøe, 1999; Scarborough, 1990). This study, however, provided unique evidence that receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge were independently related to pre-reading skills, whereas only expressive vocabulary knowledge was related to word identification abilities. Findings suggest that receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge relate to prereading skills in differential ways because of the nature of each type of knowledge. Further, those children with better definitional knowledge may have an advantage in identifying words because of more thoroughly represented semantic knowledge. Finally, results from this study indicate that better listening comprehension skills facilitate word identification.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the research just mentioned so far, the connection between early language ability or early oracy and the ability to read well later in school seems clear. There is another connection in this discussion that I believe needs to be made which might help our understanding. That is the connection that Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky makes in his discussion of thought and language, which demonstrates a connection between intelligence and language development. Harry Daniels in *An Introduction to Vygotsky* says comparing Vygotsky’s work to the behaviorist work:

Beginning in 1929, then, Vygotsky’s writings no longer reflect the assumption that all animal behavior is restricted to systems constructed on the basis of stimulus-response units. Rather, Vygotsky had begun to argue that certain primitive forms of intellect are found in animals and young children independent of any functional connection with speech.<sup>8</sup>

The innate intelligence or “primitive forms of intellect” and innate need to use language with which children come into the world are the “ground-plan”<sup>9</sup> of their education. The least that can be said is that children come with a need to explore meaning. According to the German

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<sup>3</sup> Olofsson and Niedersøe, "Early Language Development and Kindergarten Phonological Awareness as Predictors of Reading Problems: From 3 to 11 Years of Age," 470.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick J. Zimmerman, Dimitri A. Christakis and Andrew N. Meltzoff, “ Associations between Media Viewing and Language Development in Children Under Age 2 Years,” *The Journal of Pediatrics* 151, no. 4 (2007): 364-368

<sup>5</sup> “War Over Words,” *Science Magazine* 317, (2007): 1015

<sup>6</sup> Zimmerman and Christakis, “Associations between Media Viewing and Language Development in Children Under Age 2 Years,” 364

<sup>7</sup> Wise and others "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities," 1107

<sup>8</sup> Harry Daniels, *An Introduction to Vygotsky* (Routledge, UK: 1996), 36.

<sup>9</sup> “Ground-plan” is a term that Charlotte M. Mason uses in several works.

theologian von Rad, this need on the part of humans to use language is indicated in the *Genesis* two narrative. He says, “The emphasis is placed not on the invention of words but on that inner appropriation by recognition and interpretation that takes place in language. Here, interestingly, language is seen not as a means of communication but as an intellectual capacity by means of which man brings conceptual order to his sphere of life. Concretely: when man says “ox” he has not simply discovered the “ox”, but rather understood this creature as ox and included it in his imagination and his life as a help to his life.”<sup>10</sup> In other words the ‘ox’ becomes part of humankind’s context. Through the use of his language humankind intellectually conceives of his environment. Language allows humankind to intellectually express understandings gained through interaction with the environment. Humankind uses its intellect; therefore the ox is part of humankind’s effort to make meaning and sense of his environment. This understanding brings to mind Louise Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory. Rosenblatt believed that, “Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader’s consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, and scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to *him*. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text.”<sup>11</sup> In the same way as Rosenblatt explains the interaction of a reader with a text, humankind interacts by use of oral language with his or her environment to make meaning and sense out of his or her life.

It seems that there are a number of issues that can be raised from our discussion so far. 1) Humankind uses intellect and language to make sense of life, the world, as well as texts. 2) Children, hence, from the beginning should be introduced to and make use of language constantly. 3) Children interact with oral language to understand life much the same way that Rosenblatt says that readers interact with text to make their own understanding of the text. 4) And, this interaction among innate curiosity, language and life improves children’s use of language, which in turn increases their ability to read in elementary school. I realize that these points need further clarification through continued research and study. However, since the research clearly links the effect of oral language in the very early years on future reading skills, then we must consider options for child care providers and educators that will improve the oral language of very young children.

The early language development of children is a concern of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century British educator, Charlotte Mason. In her writings she encourages the parents of her day to promote the use of language. She says: “Bobbie will come home with a heroic narrative of a fight he has seen between ‘Duke’ and a dog in the street. It is wonderful! He has seen everything, and he tells everything with splendid vigour in the true epic vein; but so ingrained is our contempt for children that we see nothing in this but Bobbie’s foolish childish way! Whereas here, if we have eyes to see and grace to build, is the ground-plan of his education.”<sup>12</sup> The very young child’s narrating of a dog fight he or she sees outside is important, according to

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<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: a Commentary* (London: Old Testament Library, SCM Press LTD, 1972), 82-83

<sup>11</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1991), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte M. Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. , 1989), 231

Mason. Through talking about events she believes the child is developing language, increasing knowledge base, interacting with his environment, increasing vocabulary and the ability to order and sequence events and to put language to that order and sequence thereby increasing language abilities. Mason, long before the research cited in this article, understood that oral language improves a child's potential for reading. I am sure she would be delighted with this new research. Wise, et al make the claim that the more words a child can say and define through oral language before school the more likely they are to read well.<sup>13</sup> This should provide us with hope for all children and especially disadvantaged children.

Mason placed a high value on the use of language in her educational theories. It is evident through her methodologies and use of narration. I hope I have made a case for schools to take a closer look at oral language. And, before our discussion proceeds further, let me introduce the reader to Charlotte Mason.

### **Charlotte Mason**

Mason, who lived from 1842 to 1923, is a female educator almost lost to us although she had a significant effect on the educational theories still in use today in England. We remember James, Spencer, Dewey, Skinner, Chomsky and others, but the women educators, other than Montessori are frequently quickly forgotten. The book, *For the Children's Sake* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay published in 1984, introduced Mason to the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Orphaned at approximately the age of 16 Mason was alone in the world with only one known relative, an uncle. After having served as a teaching assistant in Liverpool, England and through the help of a Queen's Scholarship she attended the Home and Colonial School at Grays Inn for teachers located in London,<sup>15</sup> a school patterned after the work of Pestalozzi and Froebel. According to Thorley, she probably left this school early because of her finances but it was common in that day for women to leave the Home and Colonial early to begin their careers. Mason, however, later completed the requirements for a teaching certificate. But, before she completed those requirements, she started teaching at an infant school in Davison, England and simultaneously served as the head mistress.

For 12 years Mason worked at Davison with children aged 2 to age 7. As a keen observer and as an excellent thinker, the knowledge she gained during this time would later feed her thinking and writing about education.

I am going to conclude my remarks about Mason's life with a few broad statements about her life and career. In the late 1880's a group of parents formed around her to promote her ideas, which were quite radical or novel at the time. They formed an organization that was still in existence until a few years ago called the Parents' National Education Union. Soon after a journal entitled *Parents' Review* was initiated. Mason moved to the Lake District and began the House of Education in Ambleside, later known as the Charlotte Mason College, which is currently a part of the new University of Cumbria. Through these venues Mason's educational

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<sup>13</sup> Wise and others, "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities", 1093-1109

<sup>14</sup> Susan S. Macaulay, *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984)

<sup>15</sup> John Thorley, "Charlotte Mason's Early Correspondence, 1860-1879: the Life and Times of a Victorian Teacher and Teacher-Trainer," Forth coming in: *Charlotte Mason Educational Review* 3, no.2 (2008)

ideas spread around England and to various places in the world. While her work never reached the United States, according to Thorley it did have an impact on education in England.

Mason seems to have a grasp on the importance of language in life as well as education.<sup>16</sup> As a result she used oral language daily and, in fact, the idea that children love to chatter, she believed, should be used as a means of learning. One of her major methodologies was the use of narration.

### **Narration**

Mason is credited with developing and using narration<sup>17</sup> extensively in schools as a natural, organic teaching and learning strategy.<sup>18</sup> Why is this true? Firstly, narration uses a natural gift of language, which Mason believed all children had and should be encouraged to use as indicated in the quote above about the young child coming in to tell the story of the dogs fighting. Mason believed the child's innate curiosity (or Vygotsky's primitive forms of intellect) combined with language brought the child through the "act of knowing."<sup>19</sup> As we saw earlier in this article, the Russian educational psychologist, Vygotsky and the German theologian, von Rad support this natural ability of language. Secondly, narration requires children to think for themselves and to achieve their own learning.<sup>20</sup> Once the information is taken in, children must then recreate the information in their own understanding using their own language, which according to Mason puts their own original touch to the new knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Again, we hear over 100 years ago words that are very similar to Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory.<sup>22</sup> Thirdly, generating their own learning required children not to just take information in, but also, to internalize it, making the new information their own new knowledge. Because she understood these principles, Mason believed children should be encouraged to use language as much as possible. In the home children were to begin at an early age repeating stories and events from their daily lives or stories and events they have been told by family or community members. According to Scarborough and Wise, et al a rich environment of oral language increases a child's ability to know and understand phonemes.<sup>23</sup> Therefore not only does narration help children to *know* but it also increases their prospects for reading.

### **Important Points about Narration**

For Mason there are several points that need to be remembered when using narration. I mention a few here. Children's minds, she said, reject twaddle or stale, desiccated texts.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, until approximately the age of 14, children's knowledge should come to them clothed in the language of a novel.<sup>25</sup> She called such books, living books,<sup>26</sup> books written by the best writers a

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<sup>16</sup> Charlotte M. Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, (London, England: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), 191; Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*

<sup>17</sup> Narration is the verbal giving back of what one has read, heard, seen or somehow taken in.

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte M. Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 191

<sup>19</sup> Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, 99

<sup>20</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 179

<sup>21</sup> Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, 18

<sup>22</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*

<sup>23</sup> Scarborough, "Very Early Language Deficits in Dyslexic Children"; Wise and others, "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities", 1093-1109.

<sup>24</sup> Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, 105

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 109

<sup>26</sup> Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, xxx; Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 178

culture has to offer.<sup>27</sup> These books should make events, people's lives, and the stories of history *live* in the mind or in the imagination of the child.<sup>28</sup> In other words the story is the main tool in a Mason school. She believed that developmentally a child's mind rejected other forms of writing for purposes of learning. The selection of living books is an important consideration for purposes of narrating and the story is paramount.

There are others in our own generation who support this view of the story. Neil Postman in his 1989 article "Learning by Story" reveals his belief that the narrative or story is a means to help us make meaning of facts and information. He says, "Without stories as organizing frameworks we are swamped by the volume of our own experience, adrift in a sea of facts. Merely listing them cannot help us, because without some tale to guide us there is no limit to the list."<sup>29</sup> Barry Lopez in *Crow and Weasel* says, "If stories come to you care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive."<sup>30</sup> Stories, it seems to me give us a sense of identity or 'I amness.' Stories Egan says, "invite us to come to know the world and our place in it. Whether narratives of history, present experience, or the imagination, stories call us to consider what we know, what we hope for, who we are, and what and whom we care about."<sup>31</sup> Mason used the story extensively with children under the age of 14. Narration is the way children made stories their own, creating their own knowledge and learning. Why is this true?

We know that numerous people have written about the importance of emotion in learning.<sup>32</sup> Emotion is what drives attention. This concept was known before the recent studies in brain research and its application to education. Mason gives us a clue to her understanding of the need for emotion in learning. She says, "Education should give knowledge touched with Emotion."<sup>33</sup> I take this statement to mean not just the emotional state of the learner, but also the emotional state of the text. Why is this true? She goes on to say,

"I have already quoted the charming episode in Frederika Bremer's *Neighbours*, where two school-girls fight a duel on behalf of their heroes—Charles XII and Peter the Great. Parents may be glad that we have no girl-duels today! The school-girl does not care for heroes, she cares for marks. Knowledge for her is not 'touched with emotion,' unless it be those of personal acquisitiveness and emulation. The boys and girls have it in them to be generous and enthusiastic; that they leave school without interests, beyond that of preparing for further examinations or the absorbing interest of games, is no doubt the fault of the schools. Perhaps the 'unrest' of the public mind at home and abroad about secondary education is due to the fact that young people are turned out from excellent schools *devitalised* so far as their minds go. No 'large draughts of

<sup>27</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 303

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 178

<sup>29</sup> Neil Postman, "Learning by Story," *The Atlantic Monthly* 264, no. 6 (1989): 12

<sup>30</sup> Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>31</sup> K. Egan, *Teaching as Story Telling* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 40

<sup>32</sup> R. Caine and G. Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain* (New York: Innovative Learning Publications, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991); Robert Sylwester, "On Using Knowledge: A Conversation with Bob Sylwester," *Educational Leadership* 54, no. 6, 16-19; E. Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998); Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter More than IQ*. (New York: Bantam, 1997)

<sup>33</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*

intellectual day' have been offered to their thirst; and yet the thirst was there to begin with."<sup>34</sup>

Stories provide the emotional element needed by children to drive their engagement with a text. Engaging with a text or attending to a text is required for learning to occur. Without the emotional stimulus of story that ignited the passion of the young girls Mason refers to, the measure of being educated becomes passing a test. Passion for learning is lost and many young adolescents (as well as young children) become lost in the shallowness of their immediate materialistic culture. (I use the term materialistic to signify a worldview in which matter is all that exists versus materialism that signifies a person who likes a lot of possessions.) When this happens children lose interest and lose their passion for learning and begin to aim for high test scores, high salaried jobs, which can endanger their passion for living. Emotion drives attention. According to Mason and Rosen the ability to focus is what makes a thinker a good thinker.<sup>35</sup> (While Rosen uses the term genius, I choose the word thinker because there are good thinkers who are plumbers—one does not have to be a scholar to be a good, attentive thinker.) For young children up to the age of 14 the story provides the emotional energy needed to help children attend. Any of us can see in our mind's eye our own children or children in our schools listening to a story as it is read aloud and see their faces completely lost and into another world. If it is engagement we want, then according to Mason, the story it must be. It provides the passion needed to engage the passion of the reader. Postman, Mason, Egan and others are correct with their emphasis on the story and its ability to help children engage. This engagement then helps the child in the narrating process. While story or living books help a child engage, Mason was concerned that children develop the habit of attending or focus.

The story ignites passions and helps to drive attention. Attention requires listening. Wise, et al in the quote provided near the beginning of this article make the claim that "results from this study indicate that better listening comprehension skills facilitate word identification."<sup>36</sup> This seems to be a significant finding. Mason added another criteria for narration that aided in helping children to focus, increase their engagement and thus, turn narration into a powerful instructional tool. She required that one reading of a selection. She believed that when children have the idea that they can return time and again to the text, with each return, their habit and ability to focus is dissipated. Having witnessed this work as I taught for one year in a Mason school, children can increase their ability to attend, but the other conditions such as story, have to be present. Children cannot attend to a list of facts nor to dry, dull textbooks. When the ability to attend is supported through a proper instructional approach to narration, children could very well not only increase their "listening comprehension skills" but they could also "facilitate word identification."<sup>37</sup>

### **The Results of Narrating**

What does narrating do? Oral narration beginning at an early age, according to Mason, develops the child's ability to "generalise, classify, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour in one way or another, with that capable mind of his, until the substance of his book is assimilated or

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<sup>34</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 220-221

<sup>35</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 179-180; Christine Rosen, "The Myth of Multitasking," *The New Atlantis*, no. 20 (2008): 105-110, <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking>

<sup>36</sup> Wise and others, "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities."

<sup>37</sup> Wise and others, "The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children with Reading Disabilities."

rejected, according as he shall determine; for the determination rests with him and not with his teacher.”<sup>38</sup> Husband writing an article in a 1924 issue of the *Parents’ Review* says that children, “condense, classify, generalise, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour with their minds in one way or another”<sup>39</sup> Questioning from without does not promote learning from within. Richard Allington makes this point when he says, “To foster understanding, children will need substantially less interrogation and substantially more opportunities to observe and engage in conversations about books, stories, and other texts they read.”<sup>40</sup> He later says, “The popularity of the known-answer question in schools and the tendency for such questions to focus on literal detail found in texts may, in fact, work to impede children’s understandings of how literate people actually read and discuss the materials they read.”<sup>41</sup> Narration provides a means for children to learn, retain the enjoyment of learning without the “interrogation”<sup>42</sup> of the traditional questioning strategies offered by many texts.

In their book *Read and Retell*, Brown and Cambourne describe their research findings on retelling. They refer to retelling as “an all-purpose, extremely powerful learning activity.”<sup>43</sup> While these authors discuss a considerable number of effects of retelling on the children, there is only room to mention a few here. Firstly, and most interesting to me is the author’s claim that “There was evidence of a great deal of incidental, almost unconscious, learning of text structures, vocabulary and conventions of written language taking place. While this had been hoped for and expected, we did not expect it to be as pervasive, durable and intense as it turned out to be.”<sup>44</sup> Narration of text produces this effect on children. Mason acknowledges this as well. Narration of well written texts provide the background knowledge and scaffolding that children need to move into reading and writing. Children who have engagement with well-written texts for a number of years tend to become good spellers, writers and readers. The question deserving further research is, Does narration of oral stories have the same effect on children as Brown and Cambourne claim that written texts have on children after narrating? That is, instead of the child developing in their understanding of written text because of narration, does the child develop in their understanding of oral sentence structure, vocabulary, and word pronunciation, and of course as Scarborough and Wise, et al claim in phoneme understanding? Not only does the research on oral language development imply that it does, let’s look at what Albert Lord has to say in his book on the oral tradition, *The Singer of Tales*. Through his study of the epic poetry of Yugoslavia, he watched the oral tradition in process. His conclusion is: “We realize that what is called oral tradition is as intricate and meaningful an art form as its derivative “literary tradition.” In the extended sense of the word, oral tradition is as “literary” as literary tradition. It is not simply a less polished, more haphazard, or cruder second cousin twice removed, to literature. By the time the written techniques come onto the stage, the art forms have been long set and are already highly developed and ancient.”<sup>45</sup> The inference that I make from this quote as regards oral language development is that the language patterns including word sequencing, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation are all set based on the child’s experiences with oral language before

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<sup>38</sup> Mason, *School Education Developing a Curriculum*, 179

<sup>39</sup> G.F. Husband, “Some notes on Narration,” *Parents Review* 35, no. 9 (1924): 616

<sup>40</sup> Richard L. Allington, “The Schools we have. The Schools we need,” *The Reading Teacher* 48, no. 1 (1994): 23 and 24.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Allington, “The Schools we have. The Schools we need”

<sup>43</sup> Brown and Comabourne, *Read and Retell*, 1

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>45</sup> Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), 141

the child comes to school. Therefore it is important to suggest that assistance be provided to parents and children who need an enriched oral language.

Brown and Cambourne make another claim about retelling based on their research. They say, “We noticed an enormous growth in the confidence of our young learners when approaching tasks that involved reading, writing and talking. When we tried to ascertain the source of this confidence, our interviews and other records showed that it was closely associated with their experiences during retelling sessions.”<sup>46</sup> These are significant claims. If retelling or narrating has this effect on children it seems to me that we need to consider its use, especially in very young and young children.

There is clear evidence for the use of narration. The sources cited here give clear evidence as to the power and usefulness of narrating. Narration employs oral language in young children. But the point here is that we need to be promoting the use of oral language in young children and very young children. If the results of oral narration are as good as the sources cited here claim, then suggestions as to how our institutions and families might include more oral language in very young children are in order. How might we as a culture work with children to improve oral language?

### **Suggestions to Promote Oracy**

What is hindering the educational progress in the U.S.? For this discussion, the question might be more specifically asked, What is hindering children’s reading development? Is it a deficient view of children? Mason says, “but so ingrained is our contempt for children that we see nothing in this but Bobbie’s foolish childish way!” Although our current view of children has changed significantly since the time of Mason, I believe we still have a long way to go in respecting the personhood of children. For Mason, the founding or fundamental principle of her philosophy of education is “children are born *persons*.”<sup>47</sup> She says, “The central thought, or rather body of thought, upon which I found, is the somewhat obvious fact that the child is a *person* with all the possibilities and powers included in personality.”<sup>48</sup> It would take books to flesh out this principle; however, I would like to say a few things here that are important for our topic. The personhood of children is the primary principle on which educational policy, procedure, instructional practice, and curriculum development must be based. As it is for Mason, it should be our “central thought or rather body of thought.” Programs like those of the classical movement or of Hirsch’s *Core Knowledge Series* are primarily formed based on content.<sup>49</sup> The content becomes the driving focus and begins to promote John Locke’s tabula rasa model of education.<sup>50</sup> Frequently children as persons are swallowed by a curriculum based on principles other than their personhood. The point here is that as persons, children have a natural need to know and language is the natural tool to learn. Therefore these principles that govern us as humankind need to be considered first, before curriculum is considered. When we get the cart before the horse (designing curriculum before we know how children should learn the curriculum) we do more damage than good. An example of this damage is the expectation that children from underprivileged homes who have had a weak experience with oral language

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<sup>46</sup> Brown and Comabourne, *Read and Retell: 10*

<sup>47</sup> Charlotte M. Mason, *Home and School Education: The Training and Education of Children over Nine (A Book for Parents and Teachers)*(Oxford: The Scrivener Press, 1953), xiii

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, xii

<sup>49</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *What Your Needs to Know*, Core Knowledge Series

<sup>50</sup> John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding...*, ed. A.C. Fraser (New York : Dover Publications, 1959)

brought on by poverty will perform as well as children who have had an enriched living experience that promotes lots of oral language. The poorer children spend years trying to catch up. Some never do and finally give up their natural gifts of curiosity, language and the interaction of the two. Therefore, poorly planned educational policy is not neutral and is particularly not neutral for underprivileged children.

Why is it a crucial point for underprivileged children and one to which developers of public policy need to stay attuned? Underprivileged children come to an environment that is loaded with curriculum content that they are expected to learn very rapidly in order to catch up to their fellow classmates when their language development or knowledge bank is not yet strong enough to meet such challenges. Therefore we must spend time in the homes of very young children helping their parents understand why it is so important to turn the television off and talk to their babies and very young children. Schools and parent liaisons for schools and federal and state social service departments must help train parents in using language with their very young children. They need training not so much in actually talking as they do in understanding the importance of verbalizing with their very young children even though their children cannot return the conversation. There is another option for those very young children who are sent away from home to child care providers or who have homes where these language needs cannot be met.

Mason and the British educational movement of her time used this option at the Davison School where she worked. We know this type of school as a British Infant School. The infant school in Davison, England was for 2 years olds to 7 year olds. It seems to me that we need tests (or observation tools) that measure a very young child's language development to determine which children need the extra support required for language development to grow. Unfortunately sometimes (and I think these situations are not the norm), social conditions of the family put children in a position to need outside intervention. There are models for us to use, such as the Italian Reggio Emilia preschool program, the British Infant School, Charlotte Mason Schools and others. In these schools lots of creative play (the work of children) is used to develop language. While we want to develop language in children, we must heed some cautions.

It is crucial at this point that we understand our goal is to provide language development for children for their own purposes. As a society our schools or governmental organizations should not help parents and children increase language development solely to increase their academic performance at school. Their personhood is abused when schools view their language development only in terms of test scores to serve the data needs of schools. Their language development needs to grow and schools need to be accountable, but schools and child care providers need to encourage the language development of children so children can strengthen themselves as persons which will better enable them to serve their creator, their fellow man and their country. This brings us back to developing and maturing the 'whole' child, which is what Mason means when she refers to the child as a person. Therefore, when children are identified as needing extra help with language development the total needs of the children should be our focus. The need the school or the government has to show academic growth to improve test scores so the school will look really good in the papers is not the paramount need. This approach increases the bragging rights of the school, the state or the federal government, and frequently the child gets lost in the process.

There is one other caution that must be recognized in this conversation about working with parents and very young children on oral language development. In a free society there is no freedom when parents are denied the basic right to pass on their own heritage, values and beliefs

to their children. While in a democracy there has to be shared values and beliefs, parents have to know that their values are being passed to their children. Therefore it is paramount that government supports these efforts through faith-based and community organizations that value both the cultural and societal beliefs of parents and at the same time value the shared beliefs of a democracy.

Along with helping parents understand the importance of oral language, we must educate day care centers, all child-care providers, communities of faith groups and any institutions that work with very young children. We must also educate educators. Sadly in many schools children use less language than any place in life. I remember as a principal leading a school where communication was highly valued. Children worked in groups among themselves. They worked in small groups with their teachers and other adults. Interaction and language use was highly valued. But this is not the case in many schools. Children are required to sit quietly all day at desks and not use their main tool for learning—language. This is a travesty.

### **Conclusions**

Oral language in very young children is important for their future reading skills—reading is a key for their own personal development, growth, enjoyment and, yes, reading is key for children to one day serve themselves, humanity and their country. If we want to improve the chances of children reading we must be willing to do what is necessary to assist those children who do not have the opportunity to develop their language skills. These are frequently our wonderful underprivileged children. It appears to me that one necessary option is the promotion of and the use of oral language in very young children. If this is true then we must inform parents, teachers, public and private child care providers as well as public and private schools. One of the tools that can enable children to develop in their oracy is narration. Children need to tell stories, read stories, have stories read to them and engage in rich literacy very early on with their parents, neighbors, siblings, and child care providers and communities of faith. In schools and places where children spend a lot of time, Mason's idea of using narration as a natural learning tool is an inexpensive option that must be considered and implemented. Government educational policy makers must include a greater emphasis on language development in very young children, especially those who need our help or intervention. And lastly, while the government gives it support and help to disadvantaged children, it must show respect for the values of parents as well as the values of our democracy.

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