

# EDUCATION ON THE DALTON PLAN

BY  
HELEN PARKHURST

*With an Introduction by T. P. Nunn, M.A., D.Sc., Professor  
of Education, University of London; and Contributions  
by Rosa Bassett, M.B.E., B.A., John Eades,  
and Belle Rennie, Hon. Secretary  
of the Dalton Association*



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AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED  
TO  
MRS. W. MURRAY CRANE  
MRS. ANNE ARCHBOLD  
AND  
MISS BELLE RENNIE  
WHOSE GENEROUS ASSISTANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT  
HAVE MADE IT POSSIBLE TO PRESENT THE DALTON  
LABORATORY PLAN TO THE EDUCATIONAL WORLD.

“There is a sort of mysterious upheaval of mankind in the way new things spring up, which commands our awe. At a given hour, anything wanted by the race makes its appearance simultaneously from so many quarters, that the title of a single individual to discovery is always contested and seems clearly to belong to God manifested through man.”

EDWARD SÉGUIN.

## FOREWORD

### TO THE FOURTH EDITION

SINCE the publication of *Education on the Dalton Plan*, in July 1922, the principles on which Miss Parkhurst has founded her scheme for the reorganization of school life and work, have received world-wide recognition and acceptance.

Dalton Schools now flourish on every continent; and more or less full translations of the book have appeared in eight different languages. In Japan so much interest was created that Miss Parkhurst has been invited, by the Imperial University of Tokio, to give a course of lectures there this year. The Education Department of the German Republic secured the German rights, in order to circulate a translation of the book amongst their teachers.

It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I have written, at the request of Messrs. G. Bell and Sons, an additional chapter describing the progress of the Dalton Plan during the past three years. If I seem to deal too exclusively with the results in this country, of which I have personal knowledge, I hope that my numerous correspondents in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, India, China, and Japan will believe that only lack of space prevents my referring to the exceedingly interesting accounts I have received of schools in these countries.

BELLE RENNIE,  
*Hon. Sec. Dalton Association.*

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## FOREWORD

### TO THE FIRST EDITION

I WISH to take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude for the unfailing sympathy and support accorded to me and my work by the Parents' Committee of the Children's University School; by Mr. Ernest Jackman, Principal of Dalton High School; and by Dr. M. V. O'Shea of Wisconsin University. Among those to whom I am indebted in England for advice and encouragement are Sir Michael Sadler, Mr. Edmond Holmes, Dr. C. W. Kimmins, and Professor T. P. Nunn, who has kindly contributed the introduction to this book. My thanks are also due to Miss Rosa Bassett and Mr. John Eades, who have contributed valuable accounts of experiments with the Dalton Laboratory Plan, conducted by the former in a London secondary school, and by the latter in an elementary school at Leeds.

HELEN PARKHURST.

## INTRODUCTION

TEACHING and learning are correlative occupations which have been carried on since the beginnings of human society. In this book Miss Helen Parkhurst inquires how they may best be adjusted to one another, and offers a definite answer to the question.

To many persons, teachers as well as laymen, both inquiry and answer may seem, at this time of day, to be superfluous. Does not everyone know well enough what it is to be taught and to learn? And is not discussion of so simple a matter bound to prove one of those exercises in word-spinning which delight pedants and cranks, but are a cause of just irritation to sensible people? To these objections it is enough to reply that the matter cannot be so simple, for it is one upon which wide and important differences of opinion have existed, and still exist. A fresh debate, conducted in the practical spirit which inspires the following pages, must therefore be useful, if it does no more than challenge us to re-examine accepted ideas and reassure ourselves of their soundness. In education, as in all the arts of life, a certain "scepticism of the instrument" (as Mr. Wells has called it) is constantly needed if progress is not to end in the stagnation of routine.

The central question about teaching and learning may be put thus: What is the proper distribution of initiative and responsibility between teacher and taught? The answer to be given obviously depends upon the pupil's natural attitude towards learning, his insight (conscious or unconscious) into his own needs, and the

strength of his will to satisfy them. Upon these points very pessimistic views once prevailed. A boy, it was held, cannot possibly know what is good for him, and having crept, like a snail, unwillingly to school, will learn there only what he is made to learn. Initiative and responsibility belong, then, almost wholly to his teachers. It is for them to decide not only what shall be taught, but also how and when it shall be learnt; the boy's share in the business is simply to perform his task—or, failing that, to pay the penalty attached to laziness, stupidity, or contumacy. This theory does not actually deny that boys and girls have natural interests and are keen to pursue them, but it regards them as the foe, rather than the friend, of the schoolmaster. "Go and see what Tom and Mary are doing, and tell them not to" expresses its general attitude towards the initiative of youth. As regards school learning, its working hypothesis is the idea that the child's mind is a wax tablet scraped clean to receive such characters as the teacher may choose to impress on it, or (as Dickens's Mr. M'Choakumchild thought) an empty vessel to be filled at his discretion with "imperial gallons of fact."

In its cruder forms this view will hardly be found now in any responsible quarter. Even Mr. Bernard Shaw, who thinks so poorly of schools, does not deny that boys and girls are often far happier in them than outside. And there is no doubt that they are happier and spend their schooldays more profitably than they used to do because the modern schoolmaster has, so to speak, recognized their natural activities officially, and allows them to be to some extent partners in the management of their own lives—in short, because Mr. M'Choakumchild is definitely dead. Nevertheless, it is possible for a

cynic to maintain that his soul goes marching on and will continue to do so while two institutions stand which, taken together, express the essence of his educational philosophy. Those institutions are the customary school time-table and the customary system of class instruction. For the time-table originated in the assumption that the teacher should dictate what his pupils are to do at every hour of their school lives, and the class-system in the belief that he may ignore the varied modes and rates of movement which distinguish one mind from another, and may treat five and twenty minds (or a hundred) as if they were one.

Now it may be said in defence that an institution may be very valuable, even though its origin be disreputable; that "whate'er is best administered is best"; and that, as a matter of fact, an immense amount of good work is done in schools where no alternative to the class method has ever been thought of. These things are doubtless true. The old machinery has been captured by a new spirit; but the very competence and humanity with which it is now handled have led many observers to "scepticism of the instrument"—have led them, that is, to doubt whether the class-method has not been pressed far beyond its limits of usefulness, and whether it should not be supplemented, if not wholly replaced, by another.

Some time ago the writer of these lines expressed such doubts in a passage which—since it looks beyond the disease to a possible remedy—he may be allowed to quote: \*

"You all know how a familiar word, persistently stared at, suddenly becomes almost alarmingly

\* From a Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association. Printed in the *Mathematical Gazette* for March, 1918.

strange and meaningless—how (as William James said) it seems to glare back from the page with no speculation in its eyes. You will have something like the same uncanny experience if you watch the operation of a school time-table after rigorously clearing your mind of its familiar associations. From 10.15 to 11 a.m. twenty-five souls are simultaneously engrossed in the theory of quadratic equations; at the very stroke of the hour their interest in this subject suddenly expires, and they all demand exercise in French phonetics! Like the agreement of actors on the stage, “their unanimity is wonderful”—but also, when one comes to think of it, ludicrously artificial. Can we devise no way of conducting our business that would bring it into better accord with the natural ebb and flow of interest and activity? It may be that the specialist system, often a tiresome complication of the present arrangements, would make a fluid organization perfectly feasible. There must still be, no doubt, certain fixed periods for collective work; but during the rest of the day each specialist’s room might be a “pupil room” in which boys or girls of all standing would work, singly or in groups, in independence of one another, and for variable lengths of time. It would, of course, be necessary to record each pupil’s progress and to see that he followed a reasonable programme of studies, but I find no reason why in such matters methods like those of the Caldecott Community should not be universalized.”

Years before these words were uttered the speaker, like numberless other teachers, had worked something like this plan with a group of senior pupils; and he had before his mind, of course, Professor Dewey’s work and Miss Mason’s, and especially the striking reforms in the education of young children inspired by Dr. Montessori.

But he was quite unaware that what he put forward as a dream of the future was, while he spoke, an actual fact on the farther side of the Atlantic. It was left to Miss Belle Rennie to add to her many services to progress in education by bringing Miss Parkhurst's courageous and well thought-out experiment to the notice of British teachers.

Miss Rennie's brief account of the "Dalton Laboratory Plan" appeared in the Educational Supplement of the *Times* in May, 1920, and her swollen post-bag began at once to show how widely dissatisfaction with the class-method is spread and how many teachers are looking for a better instrument of instruction. One month later, a large-scale repetition of the American experiment was initiated by Miss Rosa Bassett at the Streatham County Secondary School; in August the first vintage of her results was discussed at the Cardiff meeting of the British Association. Thereafter, interest grew so rapidly that, in July, 1921, when Miss Parkhurst came to England, accommodation could not be found for all who wished to hear her expound the "plan," and when Miss Bassett opened the doors of her school to inquirers for three days the roads of Streatham were encumbered with pilgrims!

Nothing need be said here about the plan itself, for Miss Parkhurst explains it with careful detail in the following chapters, and Miss Bassett and Mr. Eades have added an account of their experience in adapting it to the conditions of English secondary and elementary schools. It is, however, permissible to one who has the honour of introducing the book to its public, to commend the scientific temper in which it is written. Miss Parkhurst has envisaged a definite problem of great practical importance: namely, how to secure from

the vast volume of educational effort expended in schools a richer harvest of individual culture and efficiency. The "Dalton Laboratory Plan" is her solution. No one recognizes more clearly than she that there are others, and that her own is not final, but is susceptible of useful modification and development. When Dr. Montessori's work became known in this country, the movement towards what is somewhat barbarously called "auto-education" received a remarkable impulse. Everywhere reformers are now busy opening up and exploring new ways of conducting the ancient work of education. Some are "wilder comrades," sworn to cut themselves off from the old tradition and everything that belongs to it. These may regard as a miserable compromise a scheme which does not demand even the abolition of public examinations! But to less adventurous spirits, who would hasten slowly and keep on firm ground, the "Dalton Plan" offers a path of progress which may safely be taken by all who have the gifts of intelligence, devotion, and enterprise.

Boldness and originality are typical qualities of American education, and we may hope that the present close and happy association between an American teacher and the English men and women who are following her lead may also become typical. Typically American, too, is the generosity which has prompted Miss Parkhurst to assign her pecuniary interest in this book to a noble English institution—the Heritage Craft School for Crippled Children at Chailey. On all grounds we may wish good-speed to her enterprise.

T. P. NUNN.

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# EDUCATION ON THE DALTON PLAN

## CHAPTER I

### THE INCEPTION OF THE DALTON LABORATORY PLAN

AMONG American thinkers Emerson was one of the first to realize and to point out that our educational system was a failure because the ideals upon which it had been founded had lost their meaning. "We are students of words," he wrote, "we are shut up in schools and colleges and recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years and come out at last with a bag of wind, a memory of words, and do not know a thing." In a recent interview Thomas Edison, whose only formal education consisted of "some instruction from his mother" echoed this indictment. "The possibilities for the development of the human brain are," he said, "almost infinite. But the important thing is not to make young children study the thing they don't like, for the moment school is not as interesting as play it is an injury. I don't know exactly at what age a child's mind atrophies, but it is somewhere between eleven and fourteen. If you make a child study things he doesn't care for, and keep this up till he is fourteen, his brain will be impaired for ever. Children naturally like to learn. They possess great curiosity but they must be interested in the subject. Our educational methods fail to do this. Change these methods, and many more 'freaks' will be produced. I am a 'freak' myself."

Is it any wonder therefore that in the United States, where every man can be educated at the expense of his state, the percentage of failures in our colleges and universities is so high to-day. Formerly when the educational field was much narrower than it is now only a selected few went to college. They were the mental superiors in each family, chosen for their supposed fitness to enjoy the benefits of higher education. Thus they were judged and labelled as superior specimens even before they were submitted to the educational process. As a result they returned from college more or less as they went into it. Education was at that time considered a privilege and the educated became automatically a class apart, exempt from criticism. Their crystallized attitude, which school had only served to confirm, cut them off from the simpler men and women whose offspring they were. How could they have anything in common with the parental struggle and sacrifice which had made it possible for them to enjoy these advantages? They were, if anything, less able to share the common lot, having bartered their simplicity for a pedestal of intellectual passivity which rendered them useless to society at home or at large.

That was the United States of yesterday. To-day the very meaning of education has changed. It is no longer regarded as an end in itself, and for every single individual who set out in search of it in the past there are now fifty. So universal is the demand for education that the minority which remains indifferent to its advantages has become negligible. With schools and colleges filled to overflowing educationalists are face to face with new problems, both spiritual and material. The demand is not only infinitely greater than ever before, but it is also

a different kind of demand. In the old days the student went to school to get what the school had to offer him ; now he goes to school to satisfy a definite need for self-development. He is no longer disposed to learn just what the teacher proposes to teach. The mould that has done for past generations of pupils will no longer do for him.

Unfortunately the men and women who work by the old system and live by it are not only naturally interested in its preservation but they almost inevitably lose the power to judge of it impersonally. Their minds become encrusted like the system itself. And though there are many sincere and well-disposed persons among them they are apt to become, through devoting all their energies to the task of " keeping up the old traditions," incapable of re-kindling the torch of truth. Such people continue to regard themselves as the consecrated leaders of youth—leaders whose authority cannot be disputed. They continue to judge the new and varied crowd of students by the same old standards. Nothing will induce them to scrap the outworn routine for a fresh and vital method made to fit a fresh and vital humanity.

More criticism of the educational system comes from the parents of pupils. On every side one hears the question asked, " What has my daughter got out of her college training? " and again, " How has the university fitted my son for the battle of life? " The answer of the schools that they provide " experience " is only valid after a definition of what experience really is. The pioneers of the early days of American history were usually men who were quite uneducated in the academic sense of the word. Experience was their only school. Their inborn talents alone enabled them to learn the

supreme lesson of life. They were the survivors who fought and conquered. But what of those who fell in the battle and who might with the aid of some educational experience have given a good account of themselves? To-day we cannot afford so high a proportion of derelicts. We have got to find some way of expanding and strengthening the natural talents of the average boy before he goes forth into the wide struggle for life and success. We have got to provide opportunities for the average girl to learn not only how to develop her intellect but also how to conduct herself as a unit of society.

In order to acquire these two kinds of experience while we are still immature beings a favourable environment is the first essential. On this point Edwin G. Conklin writes in an illuminating way in his book *Heredity and Environment*.<sup>\*</sup> According to this author "Only that environment and training are good which lead to the development of good habits and traits or to the suppression of bad ones. . . . In general the best environment is one which avoids extremes, one which is neither too easy nor too hard, one which produces maximum efficiency of body and mind."

"In education we are strangely blind to proper aims and methods. Any education is bad which leads to the formation of habits of idleness, carelessness, failure, instead of industry, thoroughness and success. Any religion or social institution is bad which leads to habits of pious make-believe, insincerity, slavish regard for authority and disregard for evidence, instead of habits of sincerity, open-mindedness and independence."

These are the beacon lights towards which education

<sup>\*</sup> *Heredity and Environment in the Development of Men*. By Edwin G. Conklin (Princeton University Press).

should tend. By its works on the pupil we shall know it. Has our educational system succeeded in making the children upon whom it has been imposed industrious, sincere, open-minded, and independent? The answer must certainly be in the negative. This is not, however, to say that those qualities can only be developed at the sacrifice of the old and purely cultural values to the attainment of which the efforts of educationalists have been hitherto exclusively devoted. It is possible to inculcate a respect for learning and the desire for a high level of cultural development and at the same time to breed in the young that moral stamina upon which Edwin Conklin sets such price and which is indispensable to good and abundant living. But this twin ideal will only be reached if school life is modified so as to include training in real experience—that experience for which a craving exists in every youthful heart. The child must be fortified to solve the problems of childhood before he comes face to face with the problems of youth and maturity. He can only do this if education is designed to give him such freedom and responsibility as will permit him to tackle them for and by himself. Experience is that and nothing more. Without it no development of character is possible, and without character no problems can be satisfactorily solved at any age. The child, cramped and frustrated by the rules and regulations of our educational system, never gets to grips with experience in any form. He neither learns to master his own difficulties nor the difficulties bred of contact with his fellows.

It is indeed almost impossible to over-estimate the value of such experience to the child as to the adult. It tests as nothing else can test the moral and intellectual

fibre of the individual. It shapes and tempers his thoughts, sharpens and enlarges his judgment, teaching at the same time the most important lesson of all—self-discipline—as the individual comes into relation with other individuals. Group consciousness grows out of this social experience. Only by bringing it into the daily lives of our children can we give back to school life that zest and purpose and interest which it has lost.

One day when an express train was bearing me away from New York for a much-needed and long-anticipated holiday, a remark thrown out by a fellow passenger distracted me from my observation of the rapidly receding landscape.

“Would you believe it?” he exclaimed, “that upon a modern railroad less than eighty years old such as this, education and instruction are only just beginning to take the place of discipline and criticism? We used to suspend unsatisfactory workmen. Now we are trying to understand them and already we have far less trouble.”

If the speaker had been a professor instead of a railroad official—as he proceeded to tell me he was—his words would have caused me less surprise. But he had turned an unexpected searchlight upon the very problems that were then engaging my attention. As he had no idea I was an educationalist I eagerly grasped this opportunity to get an outside opinion upon them. At that moment the train flew past a band of workmen in the act of doing their job.

“Look at those men,” continued my companion, “they’ve not the slightest idea of the best way to handle their work.”

“Why not?” I enquired.

“Because the handling of the job belongs to the fore-