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## SCIENCE

Helen Parkhurst and her call to give children a voice in their own development

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In the 'Pedagogische Canon' you will find a series of portraits of educational academics and theorists, past and present. Their work is important for a better understanding of good educational practice. We try to capture the essence through key concepts, definitions and previously published work. In this article the American educator Helen Parkhurst (1886-1973). She is the founder of Dalton education, a form of innovative education that is currently popular especially in the Netherlands. In our country, about 100,000 children attend Dalton education at about 370 schools. Parkhurst's credo was: 'Real learning is experience. It's about learning to live by living, learning to work by working and learning to learn by learning.'



### **Education as a vocation**

Parkhurst was born in Durand, Pepin County, Wisconsin, a small town that had been settled by colonists only about 30 years before her birth. Immediately after high school and barely 18 years old, Parkhurst chooses education. Without further training, she is put in charge of one of the many thousands of one-room-country schools in rural America, the Black School in Waterville. It is a tough job. She is responsible for 45 children between the ages of 6 and 16 but wants to succeed at all costs.

Therefore, before starting the school year, she does something remarkable. In the last week of the summer holidays, she invites the oldest children to talk about the new school year together at school. The children start the conversation uncomfortably, but also curiously. Parkhurst gains their trust and everyone gradually gets excited. The children indicate that they would like to be able to continue working independently on interesting and meaningful tasks, and they also want to choose the order in which assignments are carried out. In addition, the idea arises to unscrew the school benches, which are in long rows, from the wooden floor and to organize them in table groups. For example, different subject or theme corners can be set up, where students can work in heterogeneous groups on the task assignments of the same subjects. They can help each other and at the same time the older children can keep an eye on and support the younger ones.

Parkhurst is enthusiastic and implements the ideas. The children are enthusiastic, because they are taken seriously and an appeal is made to their sense of responsibility. They agree to reflect regularly on progress during the school year and to adjust the working method if necessary.

There will remain two central themes in Parkhurst's career thereafter. On the one hand, the idea of giving children a voice in their own development; on the other hand, to experiment and continue to look for effective and efficient methods.

### **Developing your own practice**

After her first year of practice, Parkhurst attends a teacher training course and in the following years she continues to develop her own experiments. In larger school buildings, the subject and theme corners become subject rooms. Working with meaningful tasks is deepened with the freedom and independence in working and the responsibility that comes with it. Parkhurst also expands on the idea that the school is a community, where children learn from and with each other.

The fundamental idea behind her entire practice is experience. Parkhurst believes that the most effective way to educate children is to let them experience: "Experience is the best and indeed the only real teacher". Parkhurst thinks there is nothing more instructive. Real learning is experience. It is about learning to live by living, learning to work by working and learning to learn by learning (Van der Ploeg, 2010).

### **An interlude**

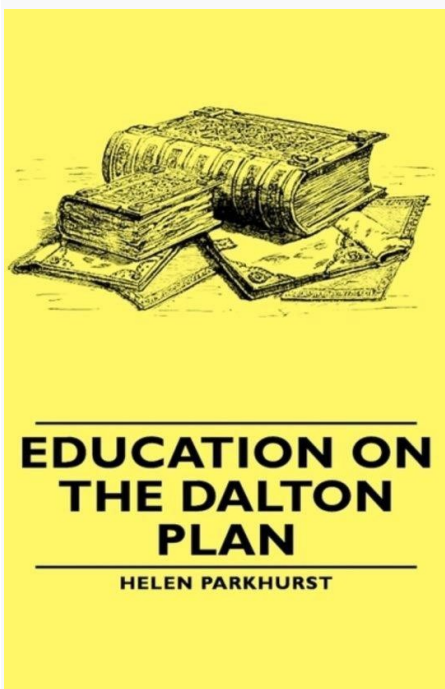
In 1913 - she was 27 years old at the time - Parkhurst went to work at the teacher training college in Stevens Point in her home-state Wisconsin. While she rebuilds the education there from her own ideas, another idea is making waves in the education world in America. That tumult is caused by Maria Montessori. During her first visit to America, 'la dottoressa' gets all the attention that year. And initiative groups are emerging all over the country to set up Montessori schools. Parkhurst becomes

curious and decides to go to Rome the following year to participate in Montessori's second international training course. Although Parkhurst has a critical attitude based on her own experiments, the sixteen years her senior and scientifically trained Montessori makes an overwhelming impression on her. Parkhurst abandons her own ideas for a while and falls head over heels for Montessori and the Montessori philosophy.

The admiration is mutual. When Montessori is asked to furnish an experimental Casa dei Bambini at the World's Fair in San Francisco in 1915, she enlists Parkhurst's help. As a stand-in for Montessori, Parkhurst makes the San Francisco experiment a great success. Parkhurst goes on to become Montessori's deputy in America, guiding initiative groups, founding schools, conducting training courses across the country, and building a Montessori teacher training college in New York. In 1919 Parkhurst ends the collaboration after four years, much to Montessori's regret. However, Montessori as a trend in America is over. All initiative groups come to a standstill. Only a few decades later, Montessori education in America will once again gain a foothold.

### **New York Dalton School**

Parkhurst then picks up her own experiments again and founds a school in New York, the still existing New York Dalton School. It then only takes a few years before Dalton education has quickly spread across the world. First, Parkhurst is still experimenting in a number of American cities, such as Dalton. She named her ideas after that experiment: *the Dalton Laboratory Plan*. But in the mid-1920s, thousands of experiments are underway worldwide, most notably in Britain, Russia, China and Japan.



Parkhurst published the only book she herself wrote about her ideas in 1922: “*Education on the Dalton Plan*”. It is a book that was written very quickly, because there was a great need for information about Parkhurst's ideas, especially in Great Britain. The basic philosophy of the book is quite simple. Parkhurst herself sums it up aptly:

*‘For service and co-operation are what we need to solve our great political and social problems to-day, and synthetic education that will provide that large and comprehensive outlook which will make these virtues a habit of thought and a practice of life. Some such total vision must be constantly in the mind of the teacher, who must ever be on the look-out for inter-relations and so stir within the minds of the children the faculty of creating channels between the different territories – channels which will fertilise the whole earth between them and give that infinite joy which comes from the consciousness of creatorship, the true function of man, the work for which he was endowed with an immortal spirit (Parkhurst, 1922).’*

Parkhurst does not give an extensive anthropology, nor does she offer an extensive social analysis, on the basis of which one could form a picture of how she views the 'why' of education and upbringing. She does say something about it. She believes that 'creativity' is the true nature of human beings and calls for children to be raised as 'fearless human beings'.

It is a term that is used in current Dalton education in the Netherlands, although Parkhurst does not give much background to it. Daltonians refer to the formation of broadly educated and broadly formed, democratic citizens, with a curious, inquiring, problem-solving and entrepreneurial attitude. They are people who have discovered and developed their own preferences, interests and talents and who, partly as a result, live, work and learn independently and in freedom and behave responsibly. Parkhurst is above all practical and pragmatic. She focuses on gaining experience. You learn to live, work and learn by practising living, working and learning, together with others in the safe context of the school as a mini society (Berends, Wolthuis, 2014). And she puts forward several ideas for this: working with meaningful tasks, on which children can work freely and independently, the idea of working with subject classrooms, where children in heterogeneous groups can work together on their task is based on their own choices. Her advice to the teacher is: 'Stay out of the way'. It is about the liberation of the child. Lead the horse to the well, but it must drink itself. Above all, it should be the children themselves who have their own time and get to work.

### **Revitalising education**

Parkhurst's goal was to revitalise education, and she experimented a lot to achieve that. Semel (1999) describes the atmosphere in which this happened at Parkhurst's



own school at the time: "During Helen Parkhurst's regime, the school exuded informality, spur-of-the-moment decision-making, abundant energy, eager engagement of both faculty and students, and always the element of surprise." Albert Lynch, one of the first Daltonians in Britain, says of her in 1924: "She desired the Plan to be a growing thing; and desired its growth to be contributed to by other experimenters besides herself" (Lynch, 1924).

Parkhurst thus happily experiments, but also asks for reflection from others: "I would be the first to hear welcome criticism" (Luke, n.d.). And she calls for experimentation. With some humour she even states: "And if something is ever invented that is more effective than my Dalton Laboratory Plan, you should definitely follow it!"

Parkhurst's call to build on her ideas and practice is a special aspect of her philosophy. That is why 'the' Dalton plan does not exist. It's not about copying the original thinking, which would make Daltonians loyal followers of Parkhurst. Parkhurst is 'just' a source of inspiration, not an 'enlightened' leader to be followed. On the other hand, she calls on teachers to always tailor their education to the children and the circumstances of a specific moment.

### **A Dutch version of Dalton**

Although most of the Dalton experiments from the 1920s and 1930s have come to an end – there are now only about 500 Dalton schools worldwide – Dalton education has flourished, especially in the Netherlands.

One of the most prominent people who contributed to this in the Netherlands is Prof. Kohnstamm, the first professor of pedagogy in the Netherlands. In 1924 he published, with a number of colleagues, a study of Dalton education in Britain. In the moral and civic education he observed at those Dalton schools, in combination with working according to a flexible school organisation, he saw the future of Dutch public education. Kohnstamm therefore became one of the first and greatest advocates of Dalton education in the Netherlands (Bigot, Diels, Kohnstamm, 1924). Partly due to his influence and contributions, the idea of broad education and personality development has been given a much more powerful place in Dutch Dalton education than in Parkhurst's practical and pragmatic Dalton Laboratory Plan. In the Dutch version of Dalton education, an important aspect of Parkhurst's original ideas has been lost: working with subject classrooms. At most Dalton schools in our country there is therefore a question of 'sub-dalton': Dalton designed in one's own classroom, within the context of the prescribed yearly class curriculum system.

### **Parkhurst after Dalton**

When thinking about innovative education that was booming in the twenties and thirties – the 'progressive era' – Parkhurst was in the spotlight. But during the crisis years and in the run-up to the Second World War, worldwide attention waned. In 1942, Parkhurst resigned from her own school in New York and opted for a

surprising new career, which has remained relatively unknown to many Daltonians. Carrying a portable tape recorder, she started an investigation where she interviewed children on locations about serious topics that are also of interest to children: delinquency, falling in love, religion, learning, sex, cheating, et cetera. She built up a unique specialisation and was much in demand as a pedagogue on radio and television. She received awards for several series of interviews on radio and television. She has also published a number of books about this interview work, such as “*Undertow*” and “*Growing Pains*”. The best-known book “*Window of the Childs Mind*” has also been translated into Dutch: “*De Wereld van het Kind*”.

Parkhurst died in 1973 at the age of 86 from the effects of a fall, while she still had many plans, such as writing a biography of Montessori. Her career, both in education and later in her radio and television work, was dominated by the idea of giving children a voice in their own development.

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