140 years of Parkhurst

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This year marks exactly 140 years since Helen Parkhurst was born in Durand, Wisconsin. The commemoration of her birthday on March 8 coincides with International Women's Day, a day dedicated worldwide to women's militancy and solidarity.

The commemoration of her birthday on March 8 coincides with International Women's Day, a day dedicated worldwide to women's activism and solidarity. The fact that this day overlaps with Parkhurst's birthday is coincidental, but no less enjoyable.

In Dalton education, we naturally commemorate who Helen Parkhurst was as a person and what she meant for education. But it is an interesting question which of her ideas from which period are most important to us in terms of content. Many people automatically think of the ‘Parkhurst of 1922’, when the only book she wrote about her educational philosophy was published. But there is also the Parkhurst of before 1922, when her ideas were gradually developing, the Parkhurst of the period after that (1922-1942), when her ideas took further shape at the school in New York and the school participated in the Eight Years Study (1932-1940) and her Dalton Plan spread internationally. And then there is the Parkhurst from the period after she left her school in New York and became a nationally renowned educator who did pioneering work on radio and television with her interviews of children to give them a voice in their own lives.

Which Parkhurst do we mean exactly when we commemorate her?

Parkhurst argued that there was much wrong with the education system of her time: “The use of fictitious and arbitrary authority and the unchanging rules and regulations are restrictive, uneducational, and fatal to the idea of a school as a vital social unit” (Parkhurst, 1922). That is why she wanted to revitalize education. “The Dalton Plan could help to breathe new life into education by making it a living thing that is capable of arousing and maintaining pupils' interest in their work” (Parkhurst, 1922). She sees opportunities to break through the rigid, frontal classroom approach (Luke, n.d. Oasis; Van der Ploeg, 2013).

The Dalton Plan was therefore not developed from scratch. There was existing education and existing pedagogy that needed to be revitalized step by step. And for that revitalization, Parkhurst spent her entire life developing ideas and experimenting with those ideas in her practice. Recently, new sources have been discovered, allowing us to paint a richer picture of Parkhurst's ideas than was possible until recently (see, among others: Berends & Otten-Binnerts, 2024).

If we consider not only the Parkhurst of Education on the Dalton Plan, but combine ‘all Parkhursts’, the sum total gives a rich picture of what developments in her world of ideas have yielded. We therefore do Parkhurst an injustice if we limit ourselves to describing her ideas based on the well-known publications from the early 1920s. Incidentally, those publications did form the basis for the worldwide breakthrough of Dalton education, and many forms of Dalton education around the world are built on those publications. The early publications are certainly not wrong and are still of great value, but it is important not to limit Parkhurst's ideas solely to this work.

Parkhurst in 1904-05

When Parkhurst started teaching in Waterville, she talked to the kids about how to make the school year fun. This led to the first experiment where students learned to see schoolwork as their own “job,” which they could do freely and take responsibility for. Parkhurst developed assignments and abolished the school bell and timetable as much as possible, allowing pupils to work for longer, uninterrupted periods and to organize their own time. In the subject corners, pupils helped each other and were allowed to work together. This laid the foundation for the two Dalton principles of freedom and interaction of group life.

Parkhurst in 1905-09

During her training at Central Teacher's College in Riverfalls, Parkhurst enriched the insights she had gained in Waterville with a theoretical basis. She was particularly impressed by Emerson's (1803-1882) ideas about experiential learning (“life-like experiences”). “Experience is the best and indeed the only real teacher,” she later wrote (Parkhurst, 1922). She also adopted ideas from Swift (1860-1932), who stated: “Education does not fit for life” (quoted in Parkhurst, 1922). It must be true to life, and its form and approach must be tailored to the development of the pupils.

Parkhurst in 1910-12

Swift also gave Parkhurst the idea of ‘laboratories’. In 1910, Parkhurst was given the opportunity to implement her educational ideas for the first time at a multi-grade school in Tacoma. Whereas she had previously worked with ‘subject corners’ in a classroom, she now introduced ‘laboratories’ at the Edison School, which were designed to reflect the atmosphere of the subject being taught.

Parkhurst in 1914-1919

Parkhurst is often referred to as a student and follower of Maria Montessori (Gutek & Gutek, 2020), but from the above it is clear that the period in which she worked for Montessori should rather be seen as an interlude in the development of her own ideas. Van der Ploeg (2010) points out that Parkhurst's own practice developed independently of Montessori, but when she put her theories on

paper, she did start to use some of Montessori's language. Van der Ploeg (2010) compares Montessori and Parkhurst on three crucial points: working independently, choosing independently, and the role of the teacher. It should be noted that Montessori initially focused on young children, while the Dalton Plan was originally intended for students aged 9 and above.

Parkhurst in 1919-1922

When Parkhurst founded her own school in 1919, all the ideas she had developed up to that point came together, and she took the opportunity to further elaborate on her basic principles (“freedom” and “interaction of group life”) as well as the three fundamental ideas of “house,” “assignment,” and “laboratory.” At Upway Field School, a school for disabled boys in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, she added working with graphs to her ideas. The large differences in ability levels observed among the students and the different learning situations that are arranged as a result require extra attention and expertise from the teachers in order to keep track of the students' progress. Parkhurst develops a system for this purpose using ‘graphs’, a graphical representation in the form of tables, which are used to track progress for each student, class, and subject.

Parkhurst in 1922-1942

Whereas Parkhurst wrote in 1922 that any curriculum could be applied to the Dalton Plan (Parkhurst, 1922), she subsequently focused on curriculum reform. When Parkhurst and her school participated in The Eight Years Study in 1932, this curriculum renewal gained momentum. Her aim was to realize ‘programs of study’, in which the curriculum and the task were used as a method to activate students and allow them to take ownership of their own learning (Parkhurst, 1929). Van der Ploeg (2015) summarizes the curriculum innovation as follows: "Various forms and approaches to student- and problem-based learning were tried out. The content was integrated, with a central theme chosen for each school year. The content (themes, teaching material), guidance, and organization were tailored to the needs and interests of the students. The learning environments were enriched and differentiated: for example, with drama (building plays, sets, and props), trips (extracurricular exploration of issues in the metropolis), and publications (students' own magazine; editing and writing; news, analyses, commentaries). Students were given a say in school governance and organization (“school government”). Learning objectives, especially those that transcended individual subjects, were translated into specific competencies, which standardized education and shaped its organization.

Parkhurst after 1942

One of the most important elements of Parkhurst's ideas for renewal has not yet been discussed. This concerns the pedagogical basis that underlies the educational implications of the Dalton Plan. Education on the Dalton Plan also contains hints of the pedagogical revitalization that Parkhurst desired. For example, she quotes Conklin as follows: "All education is bad if it leads to the formation of habits of laziness, carelessness, failure, instead of diligence and industriousness, thoroughness and success. Any religion or social institution is bad if it leads to habits of pious pretense and affectation, to insincerity, slavish deference to authority, and contempt for evidence, rather than habits of sincerity, open-mindedness, and independence. These are the beacons toward which education should strive" (Parkhurst, 1922).

After leaving her school in New York, Parkhurst focused primarily on her pedagogy. She interviewed countless children in small groups about essential aspects of their own lives. In these interviews, she literally gave children a voice. In this sense, her interview work was figuratively the other side of the same coin, because her educational ideas were also about giving children a voice in their own work.

In the beginning, Parkhurst's revitalization of education was primarily concerned with “a simple reconstruction of school procedures, giving pupils more freedom and creating an environment that was better suited to their learning” (Parkhurst, 1922). In her articles in The Times and in her book,

she describes a number of didactic and organizational procedures with which she aims to break through ‘lockstep teaching’, thereby making ‘real learning’ – which for her is the school's primary concern – possible again (Parkhurst, 1926). Later, Parkhurst also advocates a renewal of the curriculum and gives substance to what can be called a pedagogical revitalization. The beginnings of this can already be found in her 1922 book, but she only elaborates on it later in her career and then puts it into practice.

In summary, it can be said that Parkhurst's Dalton Plan was initially an (organizational-didactic) educational concept with the aim of ‘revitalizing’ the school procedures used in education. Later, she proposed a further deepening of that revitalization idea, with a focus on answering the ‘why’ question of education (the education of ‘fearless human beings’), improving the curriculum to ‘programs of study’, as well as pedagogical practice.

In this sense, Parkhurst's ideas are not only an educational concept, but (also) a socio-pedagogical concept that goes beyond the rational improvement and revitalization of education through a number of concrete didactic-organizational measures. The broadening and deepening, but also the integration of educational content and the pedagogical ideas she later formulated, justify the conclusion that Parkhurst developed her ideas into a form of education that we would now call broad, character-building education.

As we commemorate Parkhurst this year on the 140th anniversary of her birth, it is particularly valuable to reflect on the richness of her entire body of work and how she developed her ideas throughout her life.