

The Dalton Laboratory Plan—An American Experiment

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FOR PUPILS, 8-20 YEARS

The Time-Table Abolished

THE Dalton Method was first used by Miss Helen Parkhurst, its originator, in a little rural school in Wisconsin. After years of work it was tried in a school for crippled children, and then, in 1919, installed in the High School in Dalton, Mass. Since then it has been adopted to a greater or less extent, in France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, Russia, Poland, South Africa, Australia, China, Japan, and England. In England, alone, over 2,000 schools are using it.

Teachers in England say that what they are using is broader than simply "The Dalton Plan." They explain its wider use in England by stating that it was really not a new idea there, England had already been feeling around that very idea. Miss Parkhurst does not give the system her own name because so many others have used the mere idea to work out systems suitable to local conditions. It is not rigid.

Miss Parkhurst was a believer in the Montessori system and it was from this idea that she began to work out her plan for older pupils. However, the two systems are quite different, thus:

Montessori

Here the child has freedom in the choice of subject, but to him and the teacher is denied freedom in the use and choice of methods and apparatus.

Dalton

There is freedom to both child and teacher in the use of methods, books, apparatus, etc., but less freedom in the choice of subjects. Courses of study are not interrupted. Every pupil must complete the assignments in every subject.

Any new system is hard to introduce. It is affected by local conditions and inherits difficulties which must be considered in judging the plan. Probably the best way to explain the Dalton system is to take some notes from the Reports of the Bristol Conference, and from Miss Parkhurst's own lectures. In 1921 Miss Parkhurst gave a series of six lectures in all the important centres in England, explaining her system. In 1922, at Bristol, a big conference of all schools using her method was held and reports and papers on the system given.

Under the Dalton Plan the school is looked upon as a sociological laboratory where the pupils themselves are the experimenters, each arranging and organizing his own work in his own way, following it at his own rate without interruption or forced change. One's own rate means thorough work. Thus the first step is to do away with the time-table. The child's dislikes are usually for his subject weaknesses; he has time now to spend on these, and thus the unpleasant is conquered and ceases to be unpleasant.

Assignments

The amount of work to be covered in each subject is called an assignment. Assignments in all subjects for a month make up the contract.

The success of the plan depends almost entirely on the character of the assignments. Great care, skill and understanding are needed; and they should embody the collective experience and skill of the whole staff. They should contain not merely a statement of the ground to be covered and questions to be answered, but should arouse interest and inspire within the pupils keenness for the "job." The child must understand clearly what he is expected to do, then be left to do it. If the assignments are dull, the work will be dull also. The assignments should be varied, even to the colour of the paper. Each assignment should indicate:

1. The extent of the work to be done.
2. The aim and object of the work.
3. Suggestions as to methods of attack and lines of procedure.
4. The text and reference books to be consulted.
5. Points of interest with cognate subjects.
6. The amount of working time each section of the work suggests, and finally,
7. The test questions.

In drawing up these assignments the staff work in groups according to subjects. Individual members of, say, the English group draw up suggested assignments for the forms allocated to them. These are then considered at a group meeting, revised and modified if necessary, submitted to the staff as a whole, and finally to the principal.

This is chiefly for the purpose of correlation with cognate subjects, but also to keep a check on the amount of each. If possible, one copy should be typed for each pupil.

Preparation of Laboratories

Each room is known as a laboratory, ex. French laboratory, English laboratory, etc. These should be as near each other as possible to minimize disturbances in changing. Texts, reference books, maps, and all necessary apparatus should be grouped where needed. A notice on the door should indicate the subject, the teacher in charge, the forms allocated to that laboratory, and the times when that room is free for individual work and when required for group instruction.

Time-Table

It has been suggested that two-thirds of the time be left free for individual work and the remainder given to oral instruction. Subjects such as Physical Training, Music, Singing, Handicraft, etc., will be better taken by forms at set times, as before. In England mornings were given to individual work, and afternoons to group lessons.

Preparation of a School for the New System

An exceedingly important step is the explanation of the new system. If there is no common assembly room, a written statement of the new principles and the manner in which it is proposed to try them is given to each pupil. This may be taken to the parents. Then follows a discussion with the form teacher, then a final word from the principal. Then the new time-table is given; laboratories allocated; graphs distributed and explained. Finally the assignments are given. These may be for a week or a month. At first a few minutes may be necessary at the beginning of each session to help pupils organize their time and work. This need soon disappears. No recess is given, since the pupils are free to move about at all times.

The work is divided into months and weeks, but the pupil himself arranges his daily portion. He is free to spend as much time as he likes on any subject. But he is required to finish assignments in every subject within the required time.

As the organization proceeds, difficulties are sure to appear, and have to be adjusted. Defects in general organization, in allocation of time appear, etc. It has been suggested that before introducing the system for the new year that it be tried for a month at the end of the old year. Thus many of the difficulties will be adjusted before the system is really adopted.

Assignments differ in every school. Below are two contracts (monthly assign-

ments) which were used by Miss Parkhurst. Others may be found in various reports.

Form I—Second Contract (10 years)

(a) First week (omitted here).....

(b) Second week—

This week we are going to read about one of the most famous kings of England, Richard the Lion-Hearted. He is the son of Henry II., about whom we studied last week. The books to be read are as follows: "Story of the English"—pages 105-107. "England's Story"—pages 76-81.

Below you will find 5 questions to answer and write up. The reading and question one will count as one day's work, and the other four questions will count for the other four days of the week.

1. What is a Crusade?
 2. Describe Richard the Lion-Hearted.
 3. Why did Richard fail in his crusade?
 4. Tell the story of Richard's return trip to England after he left the Holy Land.
 5. Tell the story of the death of Richard. Show this to me before you mark it on your cards. Do this with *all* written work.
- (c) Third week (omitted here).
(d) Fourth week (omitted here).

Literature Assignment—Form II (12-14 years)

Fifth Contract

Our reading this month will be from "Rob Roy," by Sir Walter Scott. The reading will count as three weeks' work. The fourth week's work will be to write a book review of "Rob Roy." This is different from the book reports you have written before. It is the kind of thing you find in the "Literary Digest." The purpose of these reviews is to enable people to tell from reading the reviews, whether or not they wish to read the book. These are the things that should go into a book review:

1. Put down the full title and the name of the author.
2. Put down the name of the publisher, and the number of pages in the book. (This will enable the reader to know where to get the book, and how large a book it is.)
3. Give a short account of the story, putting in only the important facts.
4. Tell what you think of the book. Tell whether or not you like it, and why.

Bring your review to me when you have finished, before you mark it off on your graph.

Graphs

These are of many kinds. Each day the pupil marks on his own graph and also on the large graph in the classroom the work he has done that day. If the amount is not clearly indicated in his assignment, he consults the teacher about the marking. The graph enables him to see what he has done,