

The Dalton Plan I

By Helen Parkhurst

The "Laboratory Plan" (first made known in England by an article in "The Times Educational Supplement" of May 27, 1920) is a scheme of educational re-organization applicable to the school work of pupils from eight to seventeen years of age in the lower and secondary schools. The plan was first tried as an experiment in an ungraded school for cripple children. Later it was tried successfully in secondary day schools. Miss Parkhurst then changed the name of the plan to "The Dalton-Laboratory Plan," prefixing the name of the American city where the plan was first attempted as an experiment in a public secondary day school.

Is the word "school" a misnomer? Certainly to-day we conceive of "school" as a very different place than was formerly implied by the word. My conception of the ideal school is that it be a sociological laboratory where community life and community situations prevail; a place where community conditions, being prevalent, can be studied and assisted; a place where pupils themselves are the experimenters, not the subjects of an intricately organized experiment where they are experimented upon, or which is conducted for the benefit of others than themselves; where the purpose served is not outside their interests and conscious needs; a laboratory where the instructors grow also and become more intelligent and alert in their observation and study of child life, and where in the minds of the children the instructors are not drivers but helpers, who stand ready to serve the pupil community as their special talents are needed.

I realize that the word "laboratory" may at first seem cumbersome and even shocking to some, because it savors of vivisection and unknown chemicals. To me the word seems most significant. I chose it carefully and purposefully in an attempt to shift the educational point of view. I sought to find a word not anchored with old associations and prejudices. The layman has but to say the word "school" and the associations around carry him back to a time when the conditions and needs were very different from those now confronting us.

Why not the word "laboratory"? Sums may be put together as well as chemicals; children would have access to complete editions and be permitted to discover that Milton wrote more than one sonnet, that Japan and China lie west of the United States, that authors differ in their opinion on the same subject, that the mysteries of the world are innumerable, and can never be compiled within the covers of any one book,

When a child discovers anything outside of the school he wants to tell it to the whole of his world, he insists upon the next chapter, and there is no end to his thirst for just those things we would wish him to be about. It is this sort of self-expression which schools desire and aim for, and which becomes spontaneous when pupils are permitted to browse in these academic laboratories we plead for, and they become saturated and steeped in the lore of the laboratory environments. Imagine your surprise if some one prepared a meal for you, and then sat down and ate it before your eyes, not with the intent of denying you, but in order to prove to you how good a meal he deemed it and how much it could be enjoyed. You would be left hungry. Some schools persist in methods which only afford this kind of nourishment. Teachers prepare dissertations to feed their own vain appetites, quite unconsciously, when by moving their point of view they can prepare storehouses of rich treasure. The young discoverers will more than repay them with respect and gratitude.

Under such conditions, we would have within four walls a community of human beings; a socialized community, to which the term "experiment" could be applied only in the sense that right conditions of life would prevail regardless of prejudices persisted in elsewhere. Every

school would be a socialized community if it were but permitted to function as a community functions. We have run so, fast in perfecting school machinery that the life blood of the school has crystallized. Teachers need to study children; not books, but as books are a part of the pupil's diet, to be assimilated by the pupil, a way must be found to set the meal before him, and then permit him to eat. There is too much system, so much system I that children rebel. Their spontaneous activity, repressed in one spot, bulges in an opposite direction. In our effort to reduce educational mumps the real function of the school is lost sight of. The fittest survive in spite of conditions, but the many, upon whom society depends for its strength, are never heard from.

To socialize a single department or an occasional daily lesson is not sufficient. In some "Schools of Concentration " the pupil is made a nervous wreck because a staff of instructors dissect his time, concentrating upon him and each moment apportioned to him. If he collapses with fatigue he is brought back to semi-consciousness with physical gymnastics or socialized dramatics which he accepts as dull relief but does not enjoy. Child life should be built upon joy, giving full play to the emotions and real interests. There are flowers to be plucked on the highways and byways of life which we must stop to water. It is not enough to motor over the beautiful roads; we must take time to browse in the woods and drink deep of the joys of real experience. Education can be economical, pleasurable, and profitable. So much depends upon the pupil's voluntary cooperation that we will not get far, unless we analyse the problem from the pupil standpoint, so that we may discover and remove the impediments in the path of his progress.

The Learner's View-point

The Dalton-Laboratory plan attempts the solution of school problems by getting at them from the view point of the learner; by enlisting the genuine cooperation of the learner, thereby changing his mental attitude-and increasing his mental activity; by permitting him to look upon his education from the standpoint of a "real job", and he the contractor responsible for it; by enlisting his will in such fashion that it becomes a faithful ally to his tasks; by permitting him all the joy of an experimenter who, in search of his needs, eventually discovers him self and Continually is spurred on by each new discovery.

In order to accomplish "getting at things from the view point of the learner," it is only necessary that we permit the learner to "get at" his problem, to permit him a vantage where a view point is possible. If there is to be a course of study at all, why not a course of study written for the pupils and placed in their hands? Is it not necessary that the one who is to do the work should know exactly what he is to do? It is excellent to lay the whole year's work before the pupil. Elders can appreciate the psychology involved in an avocation, juniors can also appreciate having a job with its attendant responsibilities. Learning is an individual thing, so is getting a view point. Group consciousness is achieved when a number of thinking individuals voluntarily get together over a point of interest and exchange view points. Pupils want the whole story. A boy trades marbles or buys a dog when he sees the marbles or likes the dog. He drives a bargain, and he knows the length of the dog's tail, his markings and characteristics; he knows what he desires to do with that dog, and he knows all the difficulties that are to be met in the form of family objections. He does not immediately see how all the difficulties can be solved, but he recognizes them and he determines to solve them. Let us not be forgetful of the psychology involved in such a view point. Why should we not permit a pupil to have the same self-respecting feeling regarding his school work? Is it not worth while to permit him to say to himself, "This is my work for this year; this is the beginning, and it ends here" ? If he is to do his part as a member of a form it is very necessary that he give the "my" an inner emphasis. Is it not as fair for the instructor to let the pupil see his job as it is to demand of the headmaster that he know his own? The success of both is

interlocked.

Reorganization

The Dalton plan has to do with a simple and economic reorganization of the school, whereby pupils and teachers function to better advantage; by its inefficiency in pupils and teachers is reduced to a minimum. It does not add to or change the curriculum; it does not depend upon expensive school plants or elaborate equipment; it precludes the idea that there is any one method of teaching subjects, and approaches the matter from the standpoint of the boy and girl problem. It provides equal opportunities for advancement to bright and slow pupils alike, without being at the expense of thoroughness.

The Dalton laboratory plan demands that first of all, the instructors outline the work of the year (the curriculum or projects) so that each pupil, may be intelligent about the scope and nature of the work that he as a member of a form is expected to accomplish. This whole is subdivided into as many parts as there are months in the school, year. Each unit of work, in all its parts, is accepted by the pupil as a contract. In preparing such a syllabus it is important that each instructor be definite and leave no loopholes to encourage pupils to guess at what is required. The requirements must be stated briefly- and clearly, with proper emphasis given to the important points.

The word "plan" was used because "plan" suggests things in the large - certain ways make things possible. Certain conditions are necessary, conditions which, if understood, will not only remove the obstacles in the path of the learner but will change his attitude and make him appreciative of assistance given him by those who aim to be his understanding guides and counsellors. The conditions under which pupils work and live are the chief factors of any environment. It is the environment which must create conditions for soul growth. These conditions must be social and for the good of society. There must be the give and take of social intercourse. It is the social experience attendant to the tasks, not the tasks or acts in themselves, which occasion-and further growth.

Dr. Montessori, the great educational genius now with you, re-emphasized for the world her great need of freedom "for the child, and she has pointed out ways in which the individual can be freed. In some countries" her methods were misunderstood and poorly represented by teachers who confused freedom with licence, whereas she meant a freedom which would eliminate all the impediments which prevent man's complete development.

The Three Ages.

There are certain facts to be kept in mind in considering the child's educational needs. There are, roughly' speaking, three separate periods of development which must be taken into account. Up to the age of eight, children must have much freedom in order that their individual needs be satisfied. They must have their individual powers freed in order that they may later be able to function as responsible members of a group—this is the purpose of and reason for freedom. The "tools of knowledge" must be acquired in the second period, or pre-adolescence, generally conceived of as being the time elapsing between eight and 12. • Here there must be an accurate checking up as a preparation for the third stage, adolescence: the years from 12 to 20. Adolescence should have more freedom than is generally given, but in order to assure ourselves that the line of least resistance will not be followed we must build well in pre-adolescence. In adolescence the physical changes alone make it difficult for boys and girls to apply themselves mentally. The difficulties are doubled unless the "tools of knowledge" have been acquired as a reserve to draw upon. With the tools of knowledge as a ballast, adolescence may be productive of wider powers and much real culture.

It is not wise to have a different environment for each individual. What we need is a community environment complete enough to supply sufficient experiences to free the native

impulses and interests of each individual of the group. Any impediments in the way of native impulses prevent the release of pupil energy. It is not the creation of pupil energy, but release and use of energy that is the problem of education. To succeed in this will work magic. We sometimes forget that an individual pupil may live outside his group with his freedom limited to a mere permit of passing at his own rate of speed over a common mental; highway called the curriculum, and that this may end by his becoming anti-social. The Dalton Laboratory Plan creates conditions which permit the pupil to enjoy an environment where the very conditions enjoyed necessitate that he use his energy to function as a member of society, in which he is accepted or rejected according to his functioning. The laws of such a community are most valuable when they are not imposed from without; when they are unwritten and unspoken; when they are conditions in the very atmosphere breathed by the community; and where community existence is justified by the service it renders in making each free man always conscious that he as a member is a coworker responsible to and for others.

Dr. Dewey, the great "American educator, gave us a great principle of education when he said: *"The object of a democratic education is not merely to make an individual an intelligent participator in the life of his immediate group, but to bring the various groups into such constant inter-action that no individual, no economic group could presume to live independently of others."*

Some teachers considered themselves followers of Dr. Dewey when they but made toy-villages and played at society on a miniature-scale. They fell far short of the fundamental-philosophy which he applies to society generally. The Dalton Laboratory Plan aims to establish a community within the school, where the school life will duplicate in its complete functioning, the life outside. It does not depend upon restaffing a school or remodelling the building.

The Dalton Laboratory Plan has little to offer to the period of infancy. It is a plan of work designed for elementary and secondary schools, and so concerns itself with the periods of pre-adolescence and adolescence, or the time from eight to 12 years of age, and again the period from 12 to 20. Its application has been tested practically in public and Private schools in America and England. It has proved unusually successful in a large English high school, the County Secondary' School for Girls at Streatham, numbering over 700 pupils. In order to perform a real service, in making the plan, the requirements and conditions of the public school were kept constantly in mind, for it is through the medium of the public school that the masses of children can be reached. For convenience and helpful *economy* the plan preserves a grouping of forms, the grouping to be done in ways most suitable to the purposes of any individual school. The plan suggests a simple and economic reorganization of the school in order to permit the school as a whole to function as a community.