

Helen Parkhurst

Founder of the Dalton Plan

René Berends



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Preface

From the moment Helen Parkhurst put her ideas of educational innovation into practice at her own school - the now renowned New York Dalton School - in 1919, her ideas quickly spread around the world. By the 1930s, there were many thousands of schools experimenting with Parkhurst's Dalton Plan. From the United States of America to Japan, from Europe to China, from Russia to India and Australia: all around the world, Parkhurst's ideas were seen as important building blocks for improving education.

Parkhurst, of course, was not alone in this. She was a child of her time. In America, the Dalton Plan was one of many experimental 'plans' for educational renewal, and worldwide, the 1920s and 1930s have been called the 'progressive era' due to the large-scale of experiments in education. There were numerous educational proposals in the field of reform pedagogy.

In the run-up to World War II, however, interest faded. National governments increasingly began interfering in education. A 'national curriculum' was introduced in many countries and ideas from reform pedagogy were incorporated into mainstream education, without explicitly mentioning the concept of reform pedagogy.

The situation in the Netherlands was an exception. Since freedom of education was enshrined in the Constitution of the Netherlands in 1917 and the government took a step back from implementing innovations in education, various types of reform education have managed to hold their own in the Netherlands over the past hundred years. The number of schools based on Parkhurst's Dalton Plan has even grown. In the third decade of the new millennium, there existed some 400 Dalton schools in the Netherlands, representing over 5% of the total number of schools in the country.

Outside the Netherlands, a handful of Dalton schools eventually remained - often prestigious but also exclusive private schools - but since the 1980s, there has been a marked growth there too. The Dalton Plan is back on the map in European countries, the former Eastern Bloc countries, as well as in China, Turkey and Japan, and Parkhurst has been 'rediscovered', as it was. National Dalton associations have been founded in several countries, and worldwide cooperation between different countries and schools has been taking place under the umbrella of Dalton International since 2001.

Whereas other educational innovation movements can rely on solid scientific interest and a considerable amount of specialised professional literature with descriptions of principles, and practices, this is only sparsely available on Dalton education. While practical experimentation has always been a strong suit of teachers in Dalton education, this is less true of systematic research and comprehensive descriptions of

Dalton practice. Scientific knowledge is also scarce on the genesis of the Dalton Plan and the life of its founder, Helen Parkhurst.

Because knowledge of its 'roots' is essential for using Parkhurst's Dalton Plan as a source of inspiration for practice, the Progressive Education Research Group at Saxion University of Applied Science in Deventer, Netherlands, decided to facilitate the historical research needed to write a biography. This English-language biography is a result of that. It is an adaptation of the Dutch-language biography already published in the Netherlands in 2011.

The book is primarily intended for teachers, students and parents who want to know more about the woman behind the Dalton Plan. The book presents an outline of Parkhurst's life, as well as a brief description of her thinking. It holds the middle ground between a more literary biography and a scholarly historical biography. It attempts to characterise Parkhurst as a person, but also to describe her thinking as objectively as possible.

Dalton education has evolved considerably. It was meant to. Parkhurst did not write a 'method'. For her, the Dalton Plan was a living educational experiment that should be permanently adapted to circumstances, the times and, above all, to the situation of the school and the children. That is why today's Dalton education is modern and relevant to the twenty-first century. One hundred years of educational research and development may have been critically evaluated, but where they have led to effective improvements and were in line with the vision of the Dalton Plan, they have always been received with an open mind.

As such, the quintessential Dalton school does not exist either. The essence of the Dalton Plan is experimentation and the search for educational improvement in the light of what the Dalton Plan sees as the purpose of education and the vision from which to work. For teachers at Dalton schools, Parkhurst's ideas are not a sacred imperative in this respect but serve as a source of inspiration for their own thinking and actions.

Dalton's field of practice today - in all its diversity - therefore looks different from Parkhurst's field of practice a hundred years ago. Time has not stood still. But today's global field of practice is keen to be inspired by that of the Dalton Plan of the past, Helen Parkhurst's Dalton Plan.

My wish is that this biography can contribute to this, and that the reader will discover how current Parkhurst's basic ideas still are. We are making the move 'back to the future!'

René Berends, 2023

Introduction

When Helen Parkhurst worked in Hudson Wisconsin from 1907-1909, she spent summers at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York taking several courses on the latest educational and pedagogical insights of the time. She also enrolled in a folk dancing course for fun; dancing was one of her great hobbies.

Is it important to know such facts about the woman whose in memoriam in the Washington Post in 1973 said she was among the hundred most famous educators of all time?¹ Or does writing about a young woman's fondness for folk dancing tend towards the kind of paparazzi journalism that pretends that all information about the personal lives of famous people is interesting?



Helen Parkhurst at the New York Dalton School

When writing this biography on Parkhurst, the question was always: what should I recount and what not? Facts and anecdotes are sometimes nice as trivia, but things only become serious and interesting when they can be related to the genesis of Parkhurst's ideas. So, the fact that Parkhurst was an enthusiastic dancer in her younger years only becomes noteworthy when we discover that, in the school year following her summer school in New York, she taught the children in her class in Tacoma to dance for fun. This was far from usual in 1909 and will have been considered inappropriate by some, partly because Parkhurst joined in energetically with the children.

The story about Parkhurst dancing became even more interesting when I discovered that this dancing with her class led to her being asked to direct the opening of the High School Stadium in Tacoma in 1910. She was asked to perform a number of dances with hundreds of children during the ceremonial opening of the stadium. Things get even more interesting when it turns out that the members of the school board considered the performance to be such a success that they wanted to pay Parkhurst for her services. The school board wanted to keep the young, promising teacher for their schools and asked her what her wishes were. And without too much trepidation, the then only 24-year-old Parkhurst told them about her educational ideas and her desire to be allowed to experiment with them for the first time in schools. She was granted her wish and given the chance to implement her ideas, not just in her own classroom but in her own school. As such, her fondness for dancing seems to have been essential for the birth of the Dalton Plan.

What do you include and what do you leave out in a biography? Sometimes things that happen in a person's life may seem like trifles at first glance, but by highlighting

¹ "She is recognised as one of the hundred greatest educators of all time, which also include Maria Montessori and Socrates." In: Dalton Den Haag (2000), p. 7.

them in a certain way, they can become important to the story you want to tell. Sometimes, too, events set processes in motion that provide opportunities for ideas to crystallise. This book provides an overview of Parkhurst's life and work and describes her ideas: the Dalton Plan. What should *not* happen in the process is the case of mistaken identities, which has to be mentioned explicitly in the case of Helen Parkhurst. In the search for information about her life and work, many secondary sources can be found that mention such a mistaken identity. Trawling the internet and literature soon reveals a namesake: Helen *Huss* Parkhurst. This fairly well-known, American philosopher and art historian, professor at Columbia University's Barnard College in New York, is incidentally a relative of 'our' Helen Parkhurst. Publications are regularly attributed to Helen Parkhurst, whereas they belong to her distant niece. Parkhurst has also been confused with the radical and militant suffragette² Emmeline Pankhurst, who with her daughters Adele, Christabel and Sylvia were active campaigners for women's rights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There was a story that Dorothy Luke's sons were initially 'not amused' when they heard about their mother's relationship with Parkhurst. They initially thought that their mother had close relations with the activist Pankhurst and were apparently displeased.³

This biography has been written to introduce interested parties, but especially the Dalton world, to the founder of the Dalton philosophy. I have therefore chosen to describe Parkhurst's life in the light of her vision on education. The interesting aspect of this theme is that the Dalton Plan is an expression of Parkhurst's personality. It is safe to say that she is the personification of the Dalton Plan. Parkhurst *is* the Dalton Plan. In outlining the development of the Dalton Plan also provides the 'leitmotif' for the biography. Even as Parkhurst bade farewell to her Dalton School in New York in 1942 after a major row over financial embezzlement and she was forced to embark on a new career, that second career was marked by what the Dalton Plan was ultimately all about for her: giving the child a voice in its own learning and life. Parkhurst's focus is on autonomy, self-control, self-responsibility and independence: "The child needs a hand in his own education."⁴

The decision to write a biography on Parkhurst came soon after the establishment of the research group on Progressive Education at Saxion University of Applied Sciences in Deventer. Although at the time, Dalton education had become more popular than ever in the Netherlands, the members of the Dutch Dalton Association had become embroiled in a considerable debate about the association's identity. Research into its roots, a biography of Parkhurst focusing on how she had arrived at her Dalton Plan, was therefore seen as an important contribution to that debate about the essence of the Dalton Plan. Early on in the research, the researchers built up their own historical archive on Dalton education and found two unpublished typescripts on Parkhurst's life, written by Dorothy Rawls Luke, Parkhurst's close companion and assistant. The

² A suffragette was a campaigner for women's rights and especially votes for women. The term is derived from the English word 'suffrage', meaning the right to vote.

³ Dorothy Rawls Luke was Helen Parkhurst's close friend and companion in the last 30 years of her life.

⁴ Parkhurst quoted in: Lynch (1924), p. 70.

copies were presumably left by Luke during a visit to the Netherlands in 1990, in the hope that they would be published here.⁵

There are several references in the literature to Parkhurst's beginning to write an autobiography at the end of her life.⁶ The question arises as to how Parkhurst's autobiographical material relates to Luke's typescript. Schwegman mentions that Parkhurst's autobiographical texts were lost in a dispute over Parkhurst's estate.⁷ No plausible case for this, however, and no further evidence has been found about any quarrels over Parkhurst's estate. Luke offers a different view on the possible lost autobiographical material. She writes that the autobiography was only partly finished when Parkhurst died and that Luke herself subsequently planned to publish something on Parkhurst's life based on this and other material.⁸

Since Luke was Parkhurst's technical assistant during her life, writing an autobiography may also have been a joint activity, with Luke typing up what Parkhurst dictated. Parkhurst was already over 80 by then, her handwriting had been terrible throughout her life and - as will be demonstrated - was no writer. It could well be that Luke, after Parkhurst's death, continued the text they had begun together.

Although Luke is at times remarkably critical of Parkhurst, the source has been used with caution in writing this biography. Some parts read as if they were recorded almost verbatim from Parkhurst. As such, it is not very reliable. Moreover, the author was Parkhurst's close companion, who admired her in many ways. At times, therefore, the typescript reads more like a 'hagiography', the life of a saint, than an objective description of Parkhurst's life.

In writing her autobiography, Parkhurst will not have been able to look at her own life objectively. One might even ask why she took the decision to write such an autobiography. What did Parkhurst want to achieve? At the end of her life, did she still want to exert an influence on her legacy? And how should she be portrayed? Did she still want to prove something, or even have the final word on some of the conflictual situations she got into during her life?

Parkhurst has an interest in describing incidents and occurrences in a certain way. She will - looking back on her life - have made choices about what she would and would not recount and what she did or did not consider important to recount. She will also have forgotten incidents, deliberately omitted them or made them appear different, maybe even deliberately to her advantage, than they really were.

⁵ Dorothy R. Luke even wrote a separate introduction for a possible version of the book *Champion of Children* to be published in the Netherlands, when she visited the Netherlands in 1990.

⁶ See e.g. Schwegman (1999), p.181.

⁷ See e.g. Schwegman (1999), p.181.

⁸ Luke wrote in the preface to *Champion* that after Parkhurst's death, she had contact with a former publisher of Appleton Century Crofts, Theodore Purdy - the man who published Parkhurst's *Exploring the Child's World* in 1951. With him, Luke developed a plan to write a trilogy about Parkhurst, her radio and TV work, and Luke's own work that emerged from the radio and TV work. Luke entitled this trilogy *Oasis for Children. A Legacy from Helen Parkhurst*. However, Purdy died suddenly and the plan to publish a book about Parkhurst was shelved. Later, Luke contacted Elliot Schryver, the retired editor of Parkhurst's book *Growing Pains* at Doubleday publishers. He advised Luke to use the material only for a biography on Parkhurst. Luke gave that text the title *Helen Parkhurst, Champion of Children*. This book, too, was never published.

And if Luke's typescript came about as a story more or less dictated by Parkhurst, then Luke's expanded version has the same subjective imperfections. It was therefore important for this biography to complete and refine Luke's basic narrative and examine it in the light of additional sources. This soon brought the dissertations by Diana Lager and Susanne Popp into the picture. Both did their PhDs on Dalton education, in America (1983) and Germany (1993) respectively, and they also wrote about Parkhurst's life in their dissertations. However, joy at finding these sources soon turned to disappointment. Susanne Popp refers extensively to Diana Lager's thesis and Diana Lager refers extensively to Luke's texts. And Luke's text is Parkhurst, as mentioned above.

The danger of biographers mimicking each other was therefore obvious. Authors quoting and repeating each other when the original sources are not very objective makes the search for truth difficult. A lot of energy therefore went into finding additional sources, which shed some light on Parkhurst's life from different angles, in order to verify the information from Luke's typescript and fill in gaps in the text.

The short biography written by Vern Pinkowski in 1999 for the local historical society of Parkhurst's hometown of Durand (Wisc.) seemed at first glance to be such a source. Unfortunately, Pinkowski does not provide source and literature references in his booklet, and there is a suspicion that he too built on Luke's writings, as many of the anecdotes he cites can also be read in Luke. Moreover, Pinkowski has rather let his imagination run wild and writes about Parkhurst in an admiring, somewhat romanticised style.

Important additional material, however, has been found in Susan Semel's publications. This former New York Dalton School teacher has done archival research at her own school, which yielded a number of new points of view. The problem, however, is that Semel only describes part of Parkhurst's life, namely the time she was headmistress at the school. And Semel also complains about a lack of original sources. She apologises for this and therefore begins her description of the school under Parkhurst's directorship in 1929, ten years after Parkhurst founded the school.⁹ Parkhurst is a 'doer' and not a writer, as Van der Ploeg writes.¹⁰ Consequently, disappointingly little of her own published material is known. Nevertheless, the research carried out in the New York Dalton School archives, the Durand Historical Museum and in the Parkhurst archives at University of Wisconsin Stevens Point (UWSP)¹¹ led to a surprising number of interesting new sources. All in all, enough to verify, critically comment, refine and add to Luke's subjective typescript at important points.

These include unknown, unpublished publications by Parkhurst, travel journals and personal notes, as well as a good number of interesting journal articles. The treasure hunt also yielded some of Parkhurst's correspondence, including with a professor friend in Wisconsin, O'Shea. Third-party sources, contemporaries writing about

⁹ Semel (2002), p. 83.

¹⁰ van der Ploeg (2010), p. 23.

¹¹ After her death, Alden Parkhurst, Helen's younger brother, donated a significant part of her personal archive to the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

Parkhurst and the Dalton Plan and accounts of events in newspapers were also used to complete the story and to compare information from various sources. When writing the biography, however, Luke's typescript was used as a guide.¹²

The lack of source material should make one cautious as a biographer in making claims about Parkhurst. Nonetheless, every now and then one cannot escape writing more 'juicily' and speculatively than might be justified. It is difficult to infer what Parkhurst thought, felt and experienced from books, articles and reports. But it simply makes the account more interesting to read when Parkhurst 'fervently hopes', 'hesitates', 'is secretly proud' or, conversely, 'fearfully suspects'. "How do you know that?", the reader may wonder at such passages. The answer? The author doesn't know. At most, he can make it plausible. Occasionally, therefore, I have taken the literary freedom of stepping into Parkhurst's skin and interpreting her behaviour.

An example of this literary freedom is the introductory story 'a young teacher's fantasy encounters reality' about Parkhurst's first year as a teacher in Waterville, with which I begin the biography. This is followed in Chapter 1 by a matter-of-fact description of Parkhurst's Dalton Plan. This first chapter is mainly intended for those who enjoy reading about Parkhurst's thinking before delving into the life of the founder. It provides a description of her original practice and the underlying educational principles. Parkhurst is also briefly characterised as an educational innovator. Another important question raised in this chapter is which Parkhurst are we talking about when we talk about her thinking? Are we talking about the Parkhurst of 1922 when she published the book *Education on the Dalton Plan*? Are we talking about Parkhurst in 1942 when she stops working at her school, or perhaps the Parkhurst at the end of her life when there are also publications of hers which reveal a more pedagogical angle on her interview work with children? It is difficult to talk about Parkhurst's quintessential thinking. Parkhurst's thinking evolved throughout her life. Chapters 2 to 11 chronologically outline Parkhurst's life and describe how the Dalton Plan developed.

The biography concludes in chapter 12 with a characterisation of Parkhurst as a person. What kind of woman was she? This mainly involves characterisations that can be found in the literature about her and conclusions that can be drawn from the many sources consulted.

A young teacher's fantasy encounters reality

A few weeks before the new school year started at No 5 Elementary Public School in Waterville, Helen Parkhurst collected the key to the little school where she has been appointed as a teacher from James Black, the chairman of the school board. It was the summer of 1904. Helen had attained her high school diploma in the spring in Durand (Pepin County) in the state of Wisconsin, and then also took the elementary teacher's

¹² The source material collected has been incorporated into the archive of historical material on Parkhurst and Dalton education set up by the author. This archive is owned by the Dutch Dalton Association.

examination. To everyone's surprise, she passed with the highest marks given that year. And while her mother made plans for her to study art history in Chicago, Helen applied to the one-man school in the Big Arkansas Valley in neighbouring Waterville with the teacher's certificate in her pocket. She was hired.



The one-room country school, where Parkhurst taught in 1904-1905, photographed in 1910

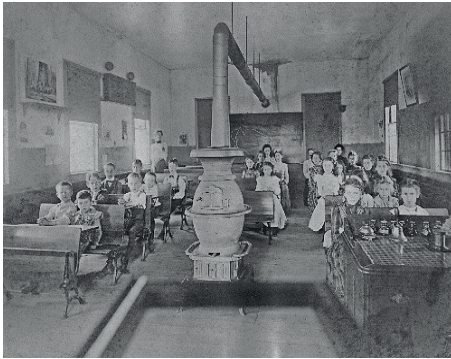
That summer, the new school year was never far from her thoughts. Constantly trying to picture the building and the children, she made plans for the organisation of her classes. Helen fantasised and dreamt about it and now wanted to see the inside of her little school with her own eyes.

James Black probably exchanged a few friendly words with the young girl before handing her the key to the school, the key to her school!

Parkhurst walked into the school like a princess taking possession of her palace. But the first encounter was a disappointment. The wooden, oblong schoolhouse was painted white. It had a grey roof, a chimney and a bell tower above the entrance. At the front was a covered veranda. Around the school there was space where the children could play and there was a school garden where vegetables and flowers were grown.

Helen apprehensively turned the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped into the little building. Once her eyes adjusted to the dark interior, the colossal, black wood-burning stove was the first thing she noticed. Parkhurst knew that winters could be bitterly cold and that she would be responsible for maintaining the fire in the stove. She thought it a hideous thing, blocking the way in the middle of the room. Helen looked around further. A large, monstrous desk stood at the front of the classroom. School desks bolted to the wooden floor in five rows wall-to-wall fill the whole room. You could barely walk between them. Helen thought the inside of the classroom was the most hideous thing she had seen in her life. She opened a drawer of the desk and found the records left by her predecessor that she needed for teaching. There was a list of students, divided into 'grades' with their ages listed. She ran through the names.¹³ She counted 45; there were no less than three of James Black's own children in the class: Martha, Ruth and Frank. She counted six pupils who were already 16 years old, only two years younger than she was herself! She also found a list of texts to be used

¹³ The class list with 45 students' names survives: Frank, Martha and Ruth Black; Luella and Millard Brown; Mable Crandall; Winnie Fisher; August, Emma, Fred and Rosa Hartung; Leonard and Mary Herbst; Harold Keeler; Bessie, Ernest and Florence Lapean; Floyd Leever; Drutilla, Ira and Lester Lind; Clara, Clarence, Eddie, Grace, Fred and Henry Pomasl; Helen, Lucy and Paul Radle; Frank, Amelia and Henry Schrader; Clyde, Edwin, Erle, Ethel, Harold and Mildred Smith; Alfred, Alta, Arthur, Helen, Herman and Henry Strese. Source: Vern Pinkowski (1999) p. 35.



Old Hawleyville school New Town Connecticut¹⁵

for the various subjects and a paper listing the subjects each pupil had passed at their level. There was also a timetable in the drawer. It showed that lessons were to be taught from 8.30 in the morning to 3.00 in the afternoon, with a half-hour lunch break in between, from 12.00 to 1.30.¹⁴

Lessons and tests were scheduled for students of a particular grade every fifteen minutes every day.

She had heard from Mr Black that two of her predecessors had resigned. The oldest boys had rebelled. And as Helen ran her eyes over the notes and looked again along the rows of school desks, she realised how regimented, monotonous and uninspiring teaching must have been with her predecessors. Her own school days were still fresh in her memory, therefore she could well imagine how bored the children must have felt. No wonder they rebelled against the restrictive educational regime of sitting still and listening. Helen had also been immensely bored herself and rarely felt she was taken seriously by the teachers who generally got the whole class to reel off what had previously been repeated over and over and memorised.¹⁶ For her, the school day had mainly been a matter of waiting for the moment when there would be another lesson or a test for her grade. She could therefore well imagine her predecessors' problems keeping order and the children's resistance. She had pondered all this that summer and the idea had sprung up to 'do it all differently'. She wanted to change tack, experiment and learn to teach in a way where students would enjoy her teaching.

Helen knew that the first days in the new school year are important in this regard. From day one, there needed to be clarity and motivation. That was why she sought and received permission from the regional education supervisor Mrs Spooner, an old friend of her mother's, to opt for a different didactic and organisational form. In retrospect, she said of this in 1952 during a visit to the Netherlands:

"I think now, that my inexperience then gave me the courage ... to make unusual changes."¹⁷

¹⁴ Luke (n.d.), *Oasis*, Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 17. NB. Dorothy Rawls Luke was Parkhurst's employee and companion from around 1950. She wrote two biographical manuscripts: *Oasis for Children and Champion of Children*. The exact dates on which these manuscripts were written are unknown, although they were probably written in the early 1980s. Neither source was ever officially published.

¹⁵ This photo gives an idea of what Helen Parkhurst found in her little school. It is one of the ten thousand other 'one-room country schools' in rural United States of America: the Old Hawleyville School in New Town, Connecticut.

¹⁶ van der Ploeg (2010), p. 10-11.

¹⁷ Timmers. In: *Dalton* (1952), vol. 4, nr. 3-4, p. 20.

That first year of experimentation at Waterville would already bear numerous characteristics of what Parkhurst later described as the hallmarks of her thinking 18 years later, in 1922, in her book *Education on the Dalton Plan*.

She abolished the timetable and got students to spend most of the class time on 'assignments', monthly assignments, where the school work was linked in terms of content. She created 'subject corners' in the classroom for five school subjects. There, students could work on the assignments under the supervision of the oldest students who were assigned the function of monitor, 'assistant-teacher'. The pupils were given the freedom to plan their work on their own in the subject corners and to consult each other if problems arose when doing their schoolwork. Parkhurst herself instructed individual pupils and groups and used the time at school to create the assignments for the pupils as well.

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Letter from Parkhurst to O'Shea, 29 August, 1923
Letter from O'Shea to Parkhurst, 5 September, 1923.
Letter from McGovern to Selling, secretary of the Dalton Association, 23 April, 1925.



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There is increasing interest in Dalton education. For many parents, teachers and principals, the principles of this form of innovative education offer a direction to take in the further development of their schools.

The origin of Dalton education lies in America. Its initiator, Helen Parkhurst, began her teaching career in rural Wisconsin more than a hundred years ago, in the autumn of 1904. She taught her students to work on assignments independently, with the freedom to plan and complete them as they saw fit, enlisting each other's help and the teacher's assistance when needed. Since then, Dalton education has evolved, but the essence of what Parkhurst intended has remained.

As the popularity of Dalton education grows, so does the need for information about Parkhurst's life, her ideas, and her own teaching experiments. This biography aims to meet that need. It paints a picture of a woman who wanted to give children a voice in their work and in their own lives and succeeded in doing so through her tirelessness and powerful personality. But that drive also led to conflicts, disillusionments and disappointments.



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