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AN EVALUATION OF THE DALTON PLAN[1]

MARION C. SHERIDAN

The Dalton Laboratory Plan is a most interesting subject. Used first in a more or less obscure place in Massachusetts, within ten years it had passed what is sometimes known as the "international test."

It is evident that the plan merits consideration. But it is difficult to talk about it. It is so new that hard-and-fast lines have not been drawn. The plan has not become a fixed type. It is still so flexible that it almost seems as if the advocates can say "yes" to any question asked concerning the plan. That makes it quite possible for the advocates to make it seem to combine all the advantages of the traditional scheme with all the advantages of the new scheme, and to exclude all the disadvantages of both. This situation so bewildered an English advocate that she suggested the necessity for the inspection and approval of a scheme purporting to be the Dalton Plan before it might be entitled to bear that name.

There lies the difficulty of showing the weaknesses of the scheme. It is never what you had suspected. It has no faults. This discussion must, therefore, be confined to what *seem* to be the weaknesses to onlookers and to interested students of the plan.

The first thing that puzzles is the definition of the Dalton Laboratory Plan. The student goes to source books of the plan: *Education on the Dalton Plan,* by Miss Helen Parkhurst, and *The Dalton Plan,* by Miss Evelyn Dewey.

Practically every principle expressed in those books has been violated in modifications of the plan except for the retention of assignments, called "contracts" or "contract-jobs," except for the "graphs," and the belief in the plan as an efficient method of individual instruction.

The source books name freedom as the first principle. Freedom meant freedom of movement, which has been curtailed in the modi-

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fications. It meant freedom of communication, the means of securing the second principle, co-operation or interaction of mind on mind. That too has been limited. It is no longer possible in many of the modifications for the younger pupils, wrestling with a "contract-job," to be in the same laboratory and in communication with older pupils who are encouraged to help them. The source books suggest freedom of schedule. One of the first steps was what Miss Parkhurst called the ruthless abolition of the time-table. There would be no bells. Herd work was to cease. In many of the modifications, the bell has been retained. Each pupil, unhampered by a schedule, was to be free to budget his own time and thereby learn initiative and independence. That opportunity is limited where a pupil follows a time-table and is permitted to budget a brief period of fifteen or twenty minutes. The pupil was to be free to work at his own pace on a "contract-job," which had been approved in each subject by all the teachers. That is no longer so. He works at a pace that is constantly being checked, on an assignment prepared by a department or by a part of a department. The necessity for checking the pace has been felt even by the advocates. An English headmaster, an advocate, has written on the right of a boy to work at his own pace, and he calls this "an inherent weakness" of the Laboratory Plan. His comment is to be found in a most illuminating booklet, *Report of a Conference on the Dalton Plan in Secondary Schools Held at Gipsy Hill Training College, April 24–27, 1923*,[1] obtainable from the Dalton Association in London. The comment is as follows:

> And now every boy is required to do a week's work in every subject in a week. In that sense there is a little bit of compulsion; we do say that a certain amount of work must be covered in a year. There is nothing artificial about that, when you think that these boys are going out into the world to work, where they will have to do a week's work in a week, and it is just as well that a boy should learn to do a certain amount of work in a given time.

The retention of the "contract-job" has been a retention of part of the "machinery" of the system. The retention of the con-

[1] *Report of a Conference on the Dalton Plan in Secondary Schools, held at Gipsy Hill Training College, April 24–27, 1923*. Price 1*s*. 6*d*. post free, Dalton Association, 35 Cornwall Gardens, London, S.W.7.

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tract and the discarding of other features would seem to have robbed the system of its vigor and left nothing but the "mechanics." With the contract retained, the emphasis would seem to be on written work. That and the graph would combine to make the system appear to be one claiming to center in the individual, but in reality primarily concerned with written work as a record of accomplishment, with written work as a means of testing, and with written work on the graph as a record of progress, a transfer of interest from the pupil to—bookkeeping? It is this that has puzzled students of the plan and made them seek a definition of the Laboratory Plan.

Another feature that has puzzled many is the relation of the plan to the teaching force. A new relation, we are told, has been created. The teacher is no longer the teacher. Then the question arises: "Does the teacher like the new relationship better than the old?"

From advocates, we learn that there is greater work for the teacher and a greater drain on the energies of the teacher. The system is exacting mentally and physically. At least two causes may be suggested: the burden of written work, and "individual instruction." The aim of Miss Dewey was to diminish the amount of written work lest it "become the emptiest of cramming processes."[2] Nevertheless, the written work remains as perhaps the "core" of the system, and it must be a burden. Probably every teacher has had the experience of "individual instruction" at an office hour and knows the exhaustion that follows.

Then, too, from advocates we learn of the necessity for better teachers for this scheme. One wrote of the danger of young girls, or of lymphatic teachers who would "sit down under the system" and need more supervision than the pupils. In defining the requisites of the ideal teacher for this system, this same English advocate doubted whether they could be found in America in sufficiently large numbers to make the scheme work well.[3]

Assuming, however, that there are these keen, capable, well-

[2] Evelyn Dewey, *The Dalton Laboratory Plan,* p. 28. E. P. Dutton, 1922.

[3] Helen Parkhurst, *Education on the Dalton Plan* (chap. ix, by Miss Bassett, pp. 176 and 187).

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trained teachers here in America, what does the Laboratory Plan offer to entice them into the schools? In *Principles of Education,*[4] Dr. Chapman and Dr. Counts name five factors contributing to the attractiveness of the profession. Of these, two are freedom of thought and action and opportunity for creative work. Another, salary was regarded as relatively insignificant.

What freedom of thought is permitted a teacher in a large school who does not make out the "contract-jobs" for her pupils? To be sure, a teacher may make suggestions or alterations, but such changes are minor ones.

What opportunity is there for creative work if her energies have been drained?

It is not a question of whether or not she is willing to submit and to suffer martyrdom. Martyrs may not always make the best teachers, and the influence of the teacher is undisputed. It is with the following comment that Mr. Mearns closes his part of the stimulating book *Creative Youth:*[5]

> . . . . for we must never forget the stubborn fact that confronts us in all our enthusiastic discussion of things educational: the kind of school will always depend upon the kind of teacher in the classroom.

The one conclusion, then, that these puzzled onlookers are driven to is that ultimately, not immediately, but ultimately, the plan would operate as a selective force against the retention and attraction of the finest type of teachers.

There are other questions that puzzle: questions in relation to the problem of the dull child, which is confessedly more than ever a problem; questions in relation to learning, to morals; and questions in relation to a comparative study of the consideration given to individuals by the Laboratory Plan as compared with the attention given by homogeneous grouping, and the use of such aids as tests and measurements. But these must be passed over in order to come to the specific problems of the Laboratory Plan in the teaching of English.

English includes the study of grammar, reading, composition,

[4] Chapman and Counts, *Principles of Education,* p. 582. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924.

[5] Hughes Mearns, *Creative Youth,* Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925.

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and literature; reading concerned with a mastery of the technique of comprehension, and literature concerned with the appreciation of literature.

By the traditional method, the mode of instruction in English has been the discussional method, supplemented by the demonstration method, the lecture method, the dramatic method, and the laboratory method. The scheme is flexible, but the major emphasis is on the discussional, a term preferred by the authors of the *Principles of Education* to the word recitation. They present an interesting picture of it.

> In a lesson conducted by a skillful and spirited teacher, the pupil shares in, and indeed is, the activity; he cannot assume a passive attitude; he is responsible for more than absorbing in memoriter fashion; he is called upon to exercise his ability in thinking by helping in the solution of problems which are continually arising. The teacher and the pupil are in close contact, the stimulation of the group kindles the mind of each member; every opportunity is given to observe the extent to which the point is being understood, the pupil is allowed to ask for further explanations at the points of special difficulty and the rate of instruction synchronizes with the speed of learning. Interest is maintained by the give and take which has always made appeal to the human mind. The student is in a position to challenge the interpretation of the instructor and is able to free himself from dogmatic presentation.

By the Laboratory Plan, the emphasis is shifted from the discussional. All methods may be used, but the others are subordinated. The lecture plan for classwork may occupy an important place in the anticipatory group instruction lessons.

The application of this Laboratory Plan to the teaching of English presents a serious problem. We may all agree that the study of grammar, requiring drill and comprehension, may be treated adequately by this method if the "contract-jobs" are judicious ones. There should be no particular difficulty in the treatment of the mechanics of composition: drill on essentials and on forms. The conference has always had a place in the teaching of certain phases of composition.

The inadequacy presents itself as soon as the acknowledged necessity for a social stimulus appears in the study of reading for comprehension, in creative composition, and in literature as a study in appreciation.

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If the teaching of reading aims at comprehension, it would seem that the laboratory plan would carry comprehension little farther or no farther than the customary collateral reading.

Time and again the necessary reaction to books has been pointed out. Dr. Canby, in the *Saturday Review,* says that a good book "is only an experience that intensifies reality and increases its significance." In discussing reading for comprehension in *Essential Principles of Teaching Reading and Literature in the Intermediate Grades and the High School,* Mr. Leonard points out the necessity for enriching experience. Mr. Leonard says:

> Here the really social class in literature, where each one illustrates and makes details vivid for the rest by bringing in his own share of adventure and of perception, is superior to the best individual reading. It is this value chiefly that justifies recitations in literature; they should never be drills in understanding what is read through auxiliary aids like grammar and word-study, but really social interchange of experience, to the end of greater realization and finer, deeper living.
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> . . . .
>
> When city children to-day read "Snowbound" or "Silas Marner," it requires all the variety of experience in the entire group—specific observing of sights and sounds and country odors—to create in each one the illusion of actuality in the lines. Here is one advantage of class over solitary reading.

Composition, in certain aspects we have admitted, may be taught adequately by the laboratory method. With other aspects, particularly with the creative aspects, the laboratory method seems most inadequate.

Teachers of English have been criticized, it is true, for setting unattainable standards that have resulted only in discouragement for the secondary-school pupil who has not been able to write like Irving or Stevenson. As a reaction, English has been stressed as a tool. It should be a tool, a tool for expressing thought, experience, and emotion. And the creative may be this tool. It need not be concerned primarily with periods and commas; it need not be concerned primarily with clearness. Its chief concern may be "point of view" or "attitude," combined with content as a revelation of thought, of experience, and of emotion. The emphasis must not be entirely on clear writing. In the *Saturday Review of Literature,* there recently appeared some comments on the writing of English, presumably by Dr. Canby:

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Accuracy is enough for the dictator of business letters; for the professional writer it is only the first step. He can be as accurate as a slate roof and as clear as a plate glass window and yet have no more life in him than a billboard or a declension. . . . . There must be two Muses at the elbow of every writer ambitious of the best in English, one to hold back while the other pulls on, one for discipline and the other for expansiveness; one to teach grasp, the other reach; one with a set of principles, the other with a vision of truth, beauty, hope, and unlimited accomplishment. . . . . And if Americans lack style it is partly because they have been taught for a generation that good writing is clear writing, which is true, and that clear writing must be excellent writing, which is false.

And this kind of writing calls for social stimulus. In his introduction to Mr. Leonard's book *English Composition as a Social Problem,* Dr. Suzzallo writes:

We must not make the mistake of assuming that training in composition is purely an individual matter. Most self-expression is for the purpose of social communication.

If we wish delightful pictures of social groups at work at creative composition, we have only to read *My Class in Composition* by Julien Bezard, or that more recent thrilling picture of a large group playing a game in composition in *Creative Youth* by Mr. Mearns, who was until recently on the faculty of the Lincoln School in New York. He shows the joy of working with his class. He writes:

. . . . if we can write a pictured bit of moving English ourselves, we can fix them rigid with desire, especially if we can do it right before them on the blackboard; but if we have luckily published anything, outside of pedagogical treatises, we can have them dancing after us like a pageant of charmed vipers.

The social stimulus of the group thus is necessary in reading and in composition. The pupils learn from each other. Equally important, but too frequently overlooked, is the fact that the teacher learns from the pupils. The following quotations from *Creative Youth* bring out what most teachers, under the traditional plan, know to be only too true.

. . . . if they [the pupils] agreed with me [in an estimate of original poetry] I felt surer of my ground; if they disagreed I questioned my own judgment. Their minds had been freed; they were, consequently, clearer than their more learned elders of all the petty prejudices of taste.

One might judge the effect upon the so-called un-literary pupil—if such

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there be!—by the havoc played upon the feelings of the adults. Here is one auditor who is willing to admit that he learned about literature from them—more than he ever got out of any college class in the subject; many a time those hours have sent him eagerly off to the library and have kept him nervously up at nights scribbling away as if the Fiend himself had ordered a written assignment for the morrow!

If the Laboratory Plan does not provide sufficient social stimulus for the teaching of reading or of creative composition, it fails equally to provide it for the teaching of literary appreciation. This is definitely connected with the question of self-expression in composition. The approach to appreciation requires skill on the part of the teacher. One of the most important ways of creating an appreciation is through the hearing of good literature, especially poetry. In the Lincoln School, Mr. Mearns writes that for a large part of the term of the senior high school the pupils listen to good literature. The Laboratory Plan would make that difficult of accomplishment.

To the appreciation of literature, pupils must be guided subtly by a teacher who can aid in analysis and know when to stop. Part of the secret of knowing this lies in the mood of the teacher. She must have a fresh outlook; she must have had a recent contact with the literature. How is a teacher going to reach this pitch of enthusiasm, nay, even of inspiration, when she is inspecting written work prior to checking a graph and endeavoring to "help" inquiring pupils at work on from one to twenty different portions of a "contract-job"?

All these problems are the ones that puzzle the onlookers: first, the desire to see what the Laboratory Plan, in the modifications, hinges on besides "contract-jobs," "graphs," and the term "individual instruction," which may mean anything; second, the desire to see whether the Laboratory Plan would work for the welfare of the pupils through its ultimate operation as a selective force in the teaching profession; and, lastly, the desire to see how the Laboratory Plan can meet the problems arising from the social aspects of our English course.

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