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978-0-521-13484-2 - Progressive Retreat: A Sociological Study of Dartington Hall School
1926-1957 and some of its Former Pupils

Maurice Punch

Excerpt

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Chapter One

Introduction: The children of the new era

The lack of knowledge that there is about what actually happens in Progressive Education – deeper, the possibility that knowledge, conventionally speaking, is unobtainable about this activity: that it is of the character of faith – is galling to the new educational scientist. (Ash 1969: 13.)

The historical role of the English independent, progressive boarding schools has primarily been one of protest. Numbering about twenty and founded between 1889 and 1940 (Stewart 1968), they sought initially to emancipate the child from what they perceived to be the harshness and philistinism of the traditional, ‘public’ boarding schools; while since the last war they have contrasted themselves with what they consider to be the bleak academic formalism, the standardisation, and the impersonality of mass state education. In so doing they have questioned educational orthodoxy, have pioneered wide-ranging innovations – in the curriculum and teaching methods, in pupil self-government, in pastoral care and in coeducational provision – and have enjoyed an influence, and a notoriety, out of all proportion to their size. But their quintessential desire was to create a ‘free’ school – not repressive, not moulding, but liberating – that would, in turn, allow the child to mature into a culture-free individual.

As such they represent a rich stream of innovative experience outside the state system and yet, surprisingly, there exists scant evidence as to whether or not these alternative ventures actually work or, indeed, as to how they might be evaluated. A powerful argument advanced by progressive educators themselves is that only an appraisal of the adult lives of their former pupils can constitute a genuine evaluation of their particular form of education. But this too has rarely been attempted although Bernstein (1967) did endeavour to contact Old Summerhillians. Even studies of former pupils of public schools tend to focus on the narrow areas of occupational achievement and elite status (Bishop and Wilkinson 1967, Wakeford 1969). This work, however, reports a case study of an established, well-known progressive school, Dartington Hall School, and a follow-up study of some of its former pupils. The research aims were twofold. On the one hand there were structured interviews with former pupils which were designed to examine broadly the kind of adjustments made by individuals to the wider society after having imbibed a progressive philosophy at school. On the other hand, the author

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planned to use interview material, documentary evidence, and published sources to formulate a theoretical perspective on the radical progressive school.

Researching the progressive school

The school at Dartington was founded in 1926 and has recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. But mere durability of itself is not necessarily a sensitive barometer for measuring the quality of communal experience, and the functioning of Dartington and the fate of its former pupils are here subjected to critical scrutiny. Research, with its sceptical and even debunking tone, tends to document the gaps between ideals and practice and to confront the participants with their failures and ambivalences. In turn, the researched can question the motives, methods, and conclusions of the researcher. The resulting clash can be painful to both sides and one Trustee spoke of a 'dialogue of the deaf'. But it can also be illuminating for the impartial observer seeking knowledge about the intrinsic nature and half-concealed functioning of educational institutions.

For it is important to remember that Dartington commenced with a consciously self-critical ethos together with a strong emphasis on the role of scientific method in setting up its venture. One of its early headmasters called the school a 'research station' and a contemporary educationist wrote:

It is magnificently equipped with every educational appliance that a teacher's enthusiasm can reasonably demand or money buy; and probably most progressive schools regard it as a useful laboratory for the testing of numerous ideas which they themselves have not the means to carry out. (Pekin 1934: 38.)

The children were meticulously tested for intelligence, health records were assiduously kept, and their behaviour was minutely observed and recorded, including at one stage the content of their dreams. Indeed, the buildings themselves were in part constructed to allow the observation of young children for educative purposes.

The founder himself appeared to invite critical enquiry when he warned of the dangers of complacency and self-insulation:

By what means were we to avoid the pitfalls of so many other social experiments – the tendency to become an open-house for cranks, to allow woolly sentiment to oust sovereign reason, to let the control of considerable means protect us from rigorous intellectual self-criticism, or from those underground grievances that would, through fear, never be coaxed into the daylight? . . . Lastly, should we become a little insulated, isolated, self-satisfied bunch of folk using our means as an artificial barrier against the buffets of a highly critical, realistic, and competitive outside world? (L. K. Elmhirst 1937: 9.)

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But, in practice, it is not always easy to accept the clinical appraisal of an outsider who unfeelingly dissects your dreams. For example, the rich, intimate, and revealing portrait of the American progressive college at Black Mountain (Duberman 1972) was doubtless only possible because the college closed in 1957 and the survivors felt free to unburden themselves regarding its crises, rivalries, and traumas.

Dartington, however, is a going concern and contains several long-serving members of staff who were associated with the period about which I write, while the founder was alive throughout the period of the research. At the same time one can detect a latent hostility to evaluation among some progressives. For example, a Trustee said of the headmaster of Dartington for twenty-five years:

Bill Curry wasn't interested on the whole with what happened to people when they left the school. He didn't seem to be interested in adults at all. He had some sort of defensiveness in his mind about it but perhaps he feared to see what would become of them when he'd finished with them. But he was always unresponsive to the idea of following people up. (Recorded interview.)

While, at a gathering of educationists sponsored by Dartington, a progressive sympathiser remarked:

We shall not change things by doing little bits of research. That is going to get us precisely nowhere at all. We have got to have something just as revolutionary as was A. S. Neill forty years ago. He was a madman – and we have got to have someone who is prepared to be a madman. (Ash 1969: 7.)

It should also be borne in mind here that many progressive schools, while partly enjoying, and even contributing to, their own notoriety, have attracted a hostile and damaging press and their marginal and insecure position makes them extremely sensitive to unfavourable publicity. These schools survive by attracting parents who are prepared to pay quite high fees for their children and who have to withdraw their children from the supposed benefits of a conventional education in order to support their own belief in an unorthodox education. The schools fear that a damaging report on progressive education might make continued existence a real problem for the more economically marginal schools by hindering recruitment. In addition, of course, publication can crystallise some of the ambiguities in the institutional ethos for the participants themselves. In a sense this position gives an unduly flattering power to research studies to mould opinion when we are learning increasingly that research findings rarely resolve value debates about education but rather are used to bolster value positions. Indeed, many current educational debates show that research is always in some respects open to alternative interpretations and to criticism from a really determined opponent. The difference

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of opinion regarding my findings on Dartington, for example, would doubtless be duplicated following a research report say on Summerhill, or the Liverpool Free School.

Currently, for example, there is a spate of reforms based on 'free' or 'anti-authoritarian' schools in America, England, and Europe which aim at 'freeing' the child from the bonds of a too rigid social and educational structure. The present-day reformers who tend to get the most publicity, such as Holt (1969) and Kozol (1968), are concerned primarily with alternative education for disadvantaged groups who appear trapped by social deprivation and educational inequality. There does exist, however, a long stream of similar responses to perceived deficiencies in state and private educational provision which were sponsored by middle-class liberal intellectuals. The problem for the research-oriented social scientist, however, is how one goes about evaluating these experiences. They are often championed, or reviled, without any evidence as to their functioning. It does appear that there is a body of experience being wasted here and that it is worth posing some exploratory questions as to how one would evaluate this particular style of 'anti-school', whether it be for the rich or the disadvantaged.

Increasingly those people grappling with social policy evaluation of all kinds are becoming aware of the fact that the goals of specific programmes are frequently multiple, diffuse, and often conflicting (Marris and Rein 1967). This is compounded in education because there exist very few clear criteria of educational effectiveness (Miles 1964: 658) and because the issues are clouded by politically and ideologically charged values debates. The heated arguments surrounding the effectiveness of both the comprehensive schools in England and the educational innovations of the American Poverty Programme are prime examples (Marsden 1971; Chazan 1973). It is important, then, to appreciate that the model of an evaluation study as a classical controlled experiment may bear little resemblance to reality. Because of the complexity, subtlety, and interrelationships of the variables in the human sciences there is a grave lack of a methodology of evaluation. In addition, there is an increasingly pessimistic view of policy implementation that looks behind the lip-service to rational innovation to the concealed processes hindering successful implementation. Partly due to the effect of these research dilemmas in education – that education is typically slow as an innovative process because it is rarely possible to see where the pay-off lies and that research findings are inconclusive and open to competing interpretations – some contemporary educational radicals have become more concerned with the diffusion of power and with political or community action (Swirsky 1972).

The early progressive impetus, however, came first from a group of comfortably-off intellectuals in the upper strata of society who demanded a

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more liberal, more creative, and more spontaneous educational environment for their children and who were prepared to step outside educational orthodoxy to achieve this. The common theme uniting many of these radical ventures was that they wished to escape from formal structures; they pictured the child in an almost Rousseauesque utopia that guaranteed his freedom by de-institutionalising and de-formalising the educative process. To achieve their ends these innovators were prepared to depart radically from traditional educational models by experimenting with the social structure of the school. Yet, at the same time, these radical schools were often suffused with a liberal ideology that determined not to impose its values on their pupils. To have done so would have been to fall prey to the very moulding of character which they reviled as having a pernicious and distorting effect on personality in traditional education. To avoid this charge they abandoned the authoritarian, hierarchical structure of the traditional school and posited a radical alternative to promote the free and unhampered development of the individual child in an environment which contained the minimum of constraints; in short they institutionalised the 'anti-school'.

But what happens, then, people have continually asked, to the former pupils of these nonconforming institutions when they leave and enter the wider society? The problem was stated succinctly by Amabel Williams-Ellis, herself a Dartington parent, in an 'Introduction for Parents' to a 1934 symposium on the early progressive schools:

One of the objections that influence many people who are dissatisfied with the faults of the traditional school is the notion that if their children are sent to a modern school they will, in after life, feel themselves freaks. (Blewitt 1934: 13.)

Similarly, a teacher at a progressive school wrote of the possible problem of adjustment after school:

Children brought up in an atmosphere of beautifully nebulous idealism in a school are likely to be very rudely shocked when they first impinge on outside society. (Pekin 1934: iii.)

In fact, a good deal of the data in this study comes from a number of former pupils of Dartington who have served almost as educational guinea-pigs for an experimental education, and who spoke to me of their experiences when they were at school and since leaving. The interviewees were drawn from two cohorts who left Dartington either between 1935 and 1940 or between 1950 and 1954, and who stayed in the senior section of the school for a minimum of three years. These sixty people are termed collectively the 'main sample'. The ten men and ten women of the nineteen-thirties cohort were in their mid or late forties and the twenty men and twenty women of the nineteen-fifties cohort were in their early or mid thirties at the time of interviewing in 1968–9. In

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addition twenty men and twenty women who left Bryanston and Badminton respectively (both single-sex schools and both less educationally radical than Dartington) in the early fifties were also interviewed to provide comparative data. A number of pilot interviews were also carried out, together with interviews with some former members of staff, some Trustees, and some key informants in the old pupils' network. These are all termed collectively 'pilot' interviews. A postal questionnaire was also sent to a number of people abroad.

The sampling was confined to people resident in England, Wales or Scotland. One man wrote from abroad that he had worked as a builder, plumber, lumberjack, trapper, fisherman, ferrymaster, electrician, journalist, farm labourer, Royal Naval courier, summer-resort operator, and book-keeper; this exile wrote:

Before I hand in my knife, fork and spoon I shall return to my old stamping grounds and I shall have a wondrous tale to tell. I have owed so much to Bill Curry, Bertrand Russell, T. E. Shaw, Victor Gordon Wodehouse, St John Philby, and even Adolf Hitler. Bill Curry once asked me up to his house and read me Russell's *Free Man's Worship* and to this very day I can recall passages that flowed in those high precise tones.

Unfortunately it was not possible to interview him! But the example does raise the question of the representativeness of the sample.

In effect our sample is deficient in those former pupils who live abroad and in those who have ceased to remain in contact with the school world. It is conceivable that some respondents may keep in touch with the Dartington sub-culture because they have been unable to adjust fully to the outside world, but then this could prove equally true of some Dartingtonians who do not manifest this lack of adjustment by dependence on the school network. In generalising to the entire Dartington population, and even more to progressive former pupils as a whole, we must exercise extreme caution because of the possible sources of bias in our sample. We must face the possibility that our sample may not be representative of Dartington pupils as a whole.

This difficulty is unlikely to be resolved because there is no formal, school-based, old pupil association at Dartington, no systematic records of former pupils, and no comprehensive list of names and addresses from which to draw a random sample. An incomplete list, drawn up in 1960, was supplied by the school and this was supplemented with information from the unofficial former pupils' association, together with advertisements in the national press. Despite strenuous efforts little advance was made on the 1960 list. Until some method is found of contacting all former pupils of Dartington we have to rely on those who have remained in contact with the school; until then our research, despite its deficiencies, remains the only systematic follow-up study of former pupils of a progressive school.

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Two other qualifications must also be raised now. Firstly, one respondent remarked:

Dartington must be the easiest school in the world to do a follow-up on because of their American-style volubility.

Yet that in itself is a danger. Most of the respondents were highly articulate, intelligent people who were rarely lost for words. And for some of them hyperbole was almost a normal way of speech, while most immersed themselves with intense ease in the interview situation (one literally stretched himself out with eyes closed as though on a psychiatrist's couch). Secondly, apart from the occasional richness of the language, there was the distinct possibility of selective recall, inaccuracy, and even evasion both because they were asked to recall details of their home and school life, in some cases as long as forty years ago, and because some of the areas touched on were intimate and personal. We must, then, treat many of the quotations cited in this survey with a degree of scepticism.

An additional complication is that progressives tend to reject the very idea that their 'product' can be evaluated – the very notion of a stereotypical progressive being antithetical to their individualistic bent. A. S. Neill, for instance, asserted that most Summerhillians are successful in later life on his criterion of possessing the ability to work joyfully and to live positively, for which academic education is largely irrelevant. By the latter qualification he spiked the guns of those who saw in progressive education merely a recipe for happy idleness. But at the same time progressives maintain that the only way to judge their 'success' is to examine the lives of their former pupils as adults, about which they tend to draw favourable conclusions on flimsy evidence. What, then, do they aim to achieve with their pupils?

Firstly, the contention that there might be any incompatibility between the progressive school and the outside world is firmly rejected. On the contrary, they often assert that their form of education is more normal than the norm and that their pupils should have less trouble in adjusting to 'reality' than people from other types of school. Further, they tend to seek vindication in their former pupils' conventional success while holding a dual standard of accepting 'success' in their own terms; there is even a desire to prove that the latter not only does not incapacitate their alumni for conventional success prospects but even enhances them. This duality is often reflected in the citing of former pupils' later success in higher education.

But because progressive education was different, and because it required its pupils to be different, their adult role was sometimes portrayed as almost a crusade. The progressive graduate was to be a missionary who was to make the world a better place to live in (Child 1962: 67). At the same time aspects of that world were denigrated, including competition, commercial ambition, and technology.

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In the business and professional world there is often a hard and ruthless quality which proves extremely distasteful to those who have grown up in an atmosphere of happiness, justice, and goodwill. (Curry 1947: 120.)

The progressives' cultural, creative, nonconforming ethos complemented intellectual and artistic work more than trade, but the personal qualities of the individual were considered more important than his occupational role – better a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar. Ideal, however, was a marriage of the two criteria.

In 1896 we gained our first natural science scholarship at Cambridge – but he was also the best darning of stockings in the school and a most promising bookbinder. (Badley 1924: 69.)

If we scan the literature, then, the adult progressive should be a paragon. For he will be rational, humane, self-confident, adventurous, creative, attractive, an exemplary marriage partner, anti-authoritarian in a wholesome and discriminating way, tolerant, and devoid of prejudice (Child 1962). His traditionally educated neighbour, on the other hand, will be moulded, conditioned, inhibited, repressed, spoon-fed, a scared-to-death conformist, dull, unimaginative, uncreative; in fact, a robot-like, stunted and over-specialised pseudo-adult. But, above, all, the progressive adult should be committed and involved, as A. S. Neill (1968: 13) expounded in almost Biblical rhetoric:

If Summerhill has any message at all it is this: Thou shalt not opt out. Fight world sickness, not with drugs like moral teachings and punishments but with natural means – approval, tenderness, tolerance . . . I hesitate to use the word love, for it has become almost a dirty word like so many honest and clean Anglo-Saxon four letter words.

Who are the progressives?

Thus while John Dewey launched the American progressive movement in cooperation with the public authorities in Chicago, Reddie borrowed £2,000 from a friend to buy an Elizabethan manor house with Gothic additions set in the heart of the Staffordshire countryside. (Skidelsky 1969: 80.)

No cohesive organisation has succeeded in uniting the progressive schools as a body. They tend to be the personal statement of pioneering, strongly individualist headmasters (A. S. Neill, Homer Lane, Cecil Reddie, J. H. Badley, and Bill Curry, for examples) and often these figureheads resent labels and avoid definition. There is no progressive equivalent of the Headmasters Conference (which confers 'public school' status on its members) and the New Education Fellowship never achieved the cohesion and tactical acumen of the HMC. How then are the progressive schools to be recognised? If we

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accept the schools' willingness to appear under a progressive banner then fourteen contributed to the 1962 symposium *The Independent Progressive School* (ed. Child). This was fewer than in the 1934 symposium of Blewitt, and the fall in numbers reflects a contraction due both to the closure of several minor schools and to a general shift to the 'right'. With the exception of Summerhill, most have moved towards a more structured environment, gathering more qualified staff, paying them higher salaries, more clearly defining their roles and the boundaries of their responsibility, playing down the ideas of freedom and considerably increasing the schools' academic stress.

However, an examination of the schools in the now badly dated symposia of Blewitt and of Child reveals an immense diversity – of structure, size, constitution, and ideological stance – and they range from the radical, coeducational 'Eden' of Summerhill to the single-sex Quaker 'Eton', Leighton Park. Their common factor is that initially they posed an alternative to the traditional public school model – that Arnoldian legacy based on the classics, chapel, sport and prefects (Bamford 1967) – and their radicalism is in direct relationship to their rejection of the values and practices upholding the public school stereotype.

Above all they resented the regimentation and character building and the apparatus of control associated with it, e.g. the ritual, tradition, uniform, loyalty, orthodox Christianity, fagging, insignia, privileges, hierarchy, and the exercise of and submission to authority. They wished to be free of the paraphernalia of elite socialisation and its gentlemanly stereotype. On the criterion of distance from the public school model, I have constructed four main sub-types of progressive school.

The Friends' schools

These schools are something of a special case in that they share a common religious background, that of the Society of Friends or Quakers, and that some of their foundations reach well back into the nineteenth century. The Quaker schools are Ackworth (1779), Sidcot (1808), Saffron Walden (1811), Wigton (1815), Bootham (1823), The Mount (1831), Great Ayton (1841), Sibford (1842), and Leighton Park (1890). Two Quaker schools agreed to appear in the 1962 symposium and are included in groups below (Leighton Park and Saffron Walden).

The 'marginal' progressives

Most of these are single-sex schools which tend to see themselves on the left wing of the public schools, from which some of them are almost in-

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distinguishable. However, they usually have less emphasis than the traditional school on sport, religion, a narrow curriculum, and hierarchy, and are somewhat more sympathetic to the needs of the individual. This group consists of Abbotsholme, Bryanston, Leighton Park, Clayesmore, Gordonstoun (all public schools), and might include Rendcomb, Dauntseys, Bembridge, and St George's, Harpenden (which is coeducational).

The 'moderate' progressives

These schools tend to retain certain elements of orthodox education (some uniform, prefects, and an emphasis on academic success) while still placing themselves in the centre stream of the progressive educational tradition. Their radicalism, however, is more educational than social and tends to centre on their coeducation and their emphasis on arts, crafts, and creative activities. This subgroup is formed primarily by Bedales; Frensham Heights; St Christopher's; Badminton (single-sex); the Friends' School, Saffron Walden; King Alfred's (day only); and the Town and Country School. The latter two are situated in Hampstead and presumably the area can support two radical schools because of the high concentration of liberal–artistic families, which makes boarding less essential. Bedales and Frensham now appear in *The Public and Preparatory Schools Yearbook* as members of 'The Society of Headmasters of Independent Schools' which must have considerable sixth forms and fairly high academic standards.

The 'radical' progressive schools

These are the subgroup of schools which had set out not so much to reform the public school as to reject it. In doing so they abandoned uniform, compulsory sport, compulsory religious observance, prefects, corporal punishment, single-sex education, and narrow academic goals, as much for social and psychological reasons as for purely educational ones. The diffuseness of their emotional reaction is characterised by Aitkenhead, speaking of the early days of Kilquhanity House:

We did not begin with definitions of education. We were against war, against violence, against corporal punishment, against uniforms, against authoritarianism (and very likely against authority!). In fact largely 'agin the government'. We were for peace, for love, for life, for nature (and nature cure). And of course for freedom – and maybe for community. What a situation! (Child 1962: 76.)

They either rebelled against, or retreated from, traditional education and conventional society whereas the other progressives still centred on educational reform within a largely unchanged society. This 'radical' subgroup consisted