

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Progressive Retreat

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FOR MY PARENTS

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Progressive Retreat

*a sociological study of
Dartington Hall School 1926–1957
and some of its former pupils*

MAURICE PUNCH

*Senior Lecturer in Sociology
State University of Utrecht*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
LONDON · NEW YORK · MELBOURNE

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521134842

© Cambridge University Press 1977

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1977

This digitally printed version 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Punch, Maurice.

Progressive Retreat

Originally presented as the author's thesis, University of Essex.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

1. Dartington Hall, Totnes, Eng. – History. I. Title.

LF795.T66P85 1976 373.423'592 75-41615

ISBN 978-0-521-21182-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-13484-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction on behalf of Dartington Hall Trustees	vii
1 Introduction: The children of the new era	1
Part One: Looking back at the school	
2 An historical sketch of the school 1926–57	19
3 The parents	29
4 The children	45
5 Social control	57
6 The children's world	71
7 The academic system and the staff	83
Part Two: Life after school	
8 Leaving school	99
9 Work	113
10 Marriage and children	126
11 The progressive life-style	137
12 Conclusion: Dartington, the progressives, and the anti-institution	155
Bibliography	176
Index	180

NOTE

Quotations from recorded interviews will indicate the sex of the respondent, the period he or she was at Dartington, i.e. nineteen 'thirties' or 'fifties', and whether the respondent falls under the Main Sample ('MS') or the Pilot ('P') interviews.

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

The research upon which this book is based was sponsored and financed by the Elmgrant Trust of Dartington. It commenced in 1967 at a time when the Public Schools Commission was breathing down the independent schools' necks (as it turned out, fruitlessly). The field work was carried out in 1968–9 and the writing-up took place largely in 1970–2. The Trustees of Dartington asked that I exercise great care in the use of interview material lest individuals be identifiable, that I refrain from quoting from material in the school's files, and that I restrict my analysis of the school to the period 1926–57. These limitations clearly circumscribed my use of evidence and my analysis and a great deal of rich data has been forfeited to comply with these demands.

This work was originally presented as a doctoral thesis at the University of Essex. From its inception a large number of people have given of their time and energy in helping me to shape the research material into a presentable thesis and into a book suitable for publication. I would therefore like to express my gratitude for the advice, guidance, and cooperation of the following: Geoffrey Hawthorn, Dennis Marsden, Patricia Williams, Spencer Millham, Roger Bullock, Peter Townsend, Paul Thompson, Colin Bell, Ian Lister, Derek Phillips, Patrick and Patricia McCullagh, Penny and Maurice Sheehy, Polly Hunter, Mary Girling, Laura Tricker, Lynne McKay, and my wife, Corry. At Dartington successive drafts of the typescript were commented on by Leonard Elmhirst, Maurice Ash, Bill Elmhirst, Royston Lambert, and Michael Young.

Bunnik 1975

Maurice Punch

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction on behalf of Dartington Hall Trustees

The research presented in this report was (as Mr Punch acknowledges on the previous page) sponsored by Dartington itself. We and the other Trustees who are responsible for the school gave him all the help we could. It was, for example, with our backing that he approached ex-pupils. The reason for the endorsement was obvious enough: we hoped that an outsider and a sociologist trying to see the school through the eyes of people who had been at it would have something fresh to say about the past which could influence its future.

Given this endorsement of the research any reader would, unless something were said to the contrary, be liable to draw the implication that the Trustees also endorse the outcome. This introduction is written with the one purpose of making it clear that we do not. Maurice Punch has *in detail* much of interest to say in his report. But in our view his *general* conclusions are not justified by the ‘facts’ he has collected. It is all a question of evidence.

When, for example, he says in one of these conclusions that ‘Males in particular were handicapped for filling conventional occupational roles’, or much else equally as sweeping, what is the evidence upon which he relies? The statements of thirty men and thirty women who had been pupils and who figure in his main sample, plus a few others. That might be acceptable *if* the sixty were representative of the two thousand or so pupils who have been at Dartington in the half century since it was founded. But there is, as he admits and then seems to forget, no reason to believe that the sixty can speak for the two thousand. Unlike some other schools, Dartington has not fostered an Old Boys’ and Girls’ Association and therefore was not able to produce a list of ex-pupils from whom a representative sample could have been drawn at random. It would in any case have needed to be much larger than sixty to enable any conclusions to be properly drawn about girls as distinct from boys; about people who entered the school at different periods in its ever-changing history; and about the people who stayed longer as compared with shorter periods.

There is a second weakness in the evidence which we also fear Maurice Punch has not squarely faced – the part played by this or any school as distinct from a family, or genes for that matter, in forming character. He mentions the family background of his sample, and then fails to discuss the issue of how to distinguish its effect from that of the school. It would be flying in the face of most of the psychological evidence gathered in the last century to

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii *Introduction*

believe that the later years, of school, mattered as much as the earlier years, of infancy.

Even were the sample impeccable and the facts about the whole life-histories of people all garnered in, there would remain the almost equally difficult question of the criteria by which one evaluates them. Maurice Punch has in one dimension divided the thirty men according to the extent to which they adapt 'to the societal value system of capitalist enterprise' – whatever that means. Some do and some don't – that is clear enough. But it is far from clear what the ones that do are doing or the ones that don't are not doing. It would surely have been better to have been more systematic about criteria, and also to acknowledge more fully that the kind of lives led by people as adults, important as that may be, are not by any means the only test of a school. One of the cardinal principles of progressive education was enunciated by Christian Schiller, a great educator and member of the first team of HMIs to inspect Dartington, when he said

Children move – because they must. They touch, explore and make, and this is how they learn and grow. No children are alike or ever will be. Children live only for the present, and our job is *to help them fulfil their present stage of growth.* ('Profile of Christian Schiller', *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 September 1975. Our italics.)

Much was made of this by Hu and Lois Child, the heads who succeeded Billy Curry and who on this shared his view, in their book on *The Independent Progressive School* (1962).

And now to our fourth and major point, which is again to do with the conclusions, and above all the most sweeping ones of all in the last chapter. Mr Punch has a perfect right to believe (with or without the evidence) that 'progressive' educators are played-out idealists, and we have as much right to contend otherwise. He began his work in the sixties when social engineering was in the air, and education its handmaiden. Everyone was to be given the social opportunities that formerly had been enjoyed by only a few. Comprehensive schools with sixth forms big enough to assure teaching of subjects across the spectrum of knowledge were the instruments of this movement. Compared to this, the old progressives appeared to have little fresh to say.

Today, the picture has changed. There is a deeper malaise now than then and, at the centre of it, a disillusion with universalistic prescriptions, as with institutional remedies for human problems, with all the depersonalisation of life these bring. The comprehensive school formula is more than touched by this reaction and, wriggle as some of its more sensitive advocates may to humanise it, the old certainty is gone. Events have shown the old progressives were right to hold on. For it is the premise of their original idea, however ill-articulated this may have become, that is now becoming fashionable again: namely, the notion of a person as a person. On a wide front, the reaction in favour of this notion, and of personalistic modes of thought, is pushing back

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction* ix

the tide of ideological thought – and, incidentally, causing some self-questioning amongst sociologists, such as was hardly apparent in the sixties. In so far as progressive education has always been part of the personalist philosophical stream, it can feel respectable again.

Yet in itself this is not enough to claim. The see-saw has been see-sawing for too long. It was long ago now that Rousseau gave the intellectual impetus to progressive education through his concept of the development of the child as a child: his rationalisation (if not his discovery) of the condition of childhood. He left the matter, to be sure, in a philosophical tangle, with his bizarre notion of forcing people to be free, such as Marx and others to this day have sought unsuccessfully to unravel. Their endeavours to reconcile the person and the external world (including Society as a paradigm of Nature) in one intellectual frame of reference have been vain but dominant. Likewise, Hume may intellectually have displaced Locke, as the notion of the person as a person has supplanted that of the individual as a particle, however noble, of society: yet the influence of Locke's patristic liberal education ideas – of the young human as a proto-adult, a clean slate to be written upon by received knowledge – probably remains as strong as ever, and certainly so in American educational thought, presumably as a consequence of Locke's influence on the leaders of the Revolution. Simply to be respectable again, in terms of the history of ideas, ought not to satisfy the practitioners of progressive education.

The times we live in, perhaps naturally, are generating changes in our very thought. These changes, it is now possible to see, are as structurally deep as those by which Descartes broke the mould of medieval thought – and perhaps deeper. For they strike at the roots, not only of rationalism, but of idealism as well. This refers to all that is stemming from the great recantation Wittgenstein made in the last period of his life, with his recognition that language does not (cannot) reflect some external reality. (And we are not referring to 'language philosophy'.) This, to some, would seem to put mankind on to shifting sands, so far as all that hitherto has been taken as knowledge is concerned. More to the point, it directs the mind's attention away from knowledge and rather towards meaning: words are not labels, rather 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'. Many implications follow: not least, concerning Man's relationship to Nature – away, that is, from Cartesian scorn of the natural world, as something to be tamed and made subservient to Man; similarly, concerning materialism and its values, and our now unlimited expectations of exploiting the world; or, concerning alienation and identity and the meaning – that is, the quality – of work and the circumstances in which we do it; or the importance of play, the idea of games – and not just language games – for an understanding of human life – all matters bearing closely upon the present human condition.

How, then, does this affect the question of progressive education? It does so because progressive education, in its several guises, has been concerned, not

Cambridge University Press

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

Maurice Punch

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Introduction*

with knowledge itself, but with the place of knowledge in life. It is a characteristic which progressive educational thinkers seem to hold in common – whether Montessori or Tagore, Dewey or Neill – that they are concerned for the meaning to the child of what he (or she) learns, the context of his living experience, rather than that he should be taught knowledge for its own sake.

We also disagree with the author's thesis that a progressive school belies itself both because it must depend upon some charismatic character to sustain it, and because its children are as conformist (in their progressiveness) as any others. If the former was ever true, perhaps before the idea of schools such as Dartington was widely accepted, it is no longer the case. It was always the children themselves who attracted the Trustees' support for the school. The quality of any outward conformity such children show has always been of their own originating. We would recommend, rather, the reader should take courage from what Maurice Punch (if in contradiction) also says: 'to many people's surprise, the progressive school is a highly self-regulating, law-abiding community'. Those who actually know the school (and Mr Punch himself, ironically, did not study the school itself) would agree this is true.

We think too that we have already shown over the past five years of reciprocity with Northcliffe School, Conisbrough, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, a secondary school supported by the LEA, that progressive education is not the fad of a subculture of the middle class, but can also be suitable for adolescent children from an industrial working-class environment. There has never been any doubt that the ideas of progressive schools can apply without distortion to ordinary primary schools. We are now confident of their wider application. Moreover, the scheme has worked, by and large, without deracinating those children who have been to Dartington from Conisbrough: without, that is, their denying their origins. These are results, then, of real significance because of the presumed incompatibility of progressive and conventional regimes in any one school: the different standards they use, their different values. The Dartington–Conisbrough experience underlines the right to a different kind of educational regime from the only one that is now served up by the state.

We shall therefore continue (if we are allowed) to practise what we consider to be real progressive coeducation, even if some of those practices were established nearly fifty years ago. They remain as inimical to those in orthodox schooling as they then were; the gap has not changed; the Black Papers persist. It is these continuing practices which constitute our nature. We are certainly not in retreat: rightly or wrongly, we believe we are still with the advance.

*Maurice Ash
Michael Young*