

David Gribble
Former Teacher,
Dartington Hall School;
Present Headmaster,
Sands School, Totnes

A progressive school is marked by reasonableness, affection and mutual respect. Its discipline is the discipline of reality, rather than a discipline invented and imposed by teachers. The success of progressive methods has been demonstrated at state schools like Countesthorpe and Risinghill, as well as independent schools like Summerhill and Dartington Hall. A great many teachers in conventional schools try to put progressive ideals into practice.

Why is it that, in spite of all this, so many people regard progressive education with virulent hostility, and when a progressive school reaches the headlines, as Dartington Hall did last summer, the press so rejoices in its misfortunes?

It is not just because most progressive schools are in the independent sector. Countesthorpe College was treated extremely roughly by the press. Risinghill was closed by the I.L.E.A.

In the private sector, there is evidence from a different angle. In the very summer that Dartington was being picked out as a vice school, when even the local police said it was no worse than anywhere else, the press reported several sensational incidents from other independent schools. According to national newspapers, Eton expelled one boy and suspended six others for vandalising the local parish church, finally trying to remove the organ pipes, Stowe sacked twelve and suspended seven for drug usage after pupils had stolen a master's car to go to a party in the middle of the night, five cannabis-smokers were expelled from Fettes and two from Eton, four 'suppliers' of cannabis and LSD were expelled from Repton, and a dead baby was found in a locker at Badminton. None of these incidents received more than half a column. Dartington, where the police did not make a single prosecution after a drugs raid, was on the front page for weeks. Evidently the hostility it arouses is not merely because it is an independent school.

If you send a boy to Eton and he vandalises the parish church it is thought to be his fault and not the school's. The reaction would be very different if a child from a progressive school attacked a church. The story about the baby in the locker is so extraordinary that it is hard to believe, but the public would have had no difficulty in believing it about Dartington. "I told you so," they would have said, and felt that their prejudice had been justified.

However, to condemn a progressive school you do not need anything as sensational as a vandalised church or a dead baby. A disorderly classroom is quite enough. This illustrates the basic paradox of the public attitude - people expect pupils at a progressive school to behave perfectly at the same time as they expect them to behave badly. If the system works, they feel, the children must behave perfectly. They simply ignore truancy and crime at other schools, they forget their own adult misdemeanours - breaking the speed limit, smuggling the extra bottle of wine, losing their tempers, drinking a little too much - and assume that perfect behaviour is an attainable norm. A progressive school's pupil's unconventional appearance and informal manners are worrying, though not enough to condemn it, but as soon as one of the normal adolescent misdemeanours occurs, it is seized upon as a proof of the general inadequacy of the school's philosophy. The fact that most of the time the children behave well is conveniently forgotten.

According to this approach, if the children do not behave perfectly, the school is a failure. It would seem fairer to say that if they do not behave badly, the school is a success.

There are several possible reasons for this prejudice. It may be just that we all believe, at least subconsciously, that nothing pleasant can do you any good, and the better a medicine is the nastier it tastes. Perhaps most of us would reject this view in this simple form, but the puritan in each of us certainly suspects that all pleasure corrupts, and the ascetic believes that the only way to virtue is through suffering. These are unhappy attitudes, and for that very reason people who hold them will be particularly harsh on any system of education that contradicts them.

Another reason may be that if you have struggled through a difficult journey for a dozen years, exhausting yourself and perhaps damaging your health permanently, you cannot look with equanimity at travellers who came an easy way, enjoyed themselves thoroughly, and are eager to travel further. You will of course feel still worse if you are forcing your children to undertake a similarly unpleasant journey, and these despicable progressives keep suggesting that though the journey is important, the unpleasantness is quite unnecessary.

But perhaps the most important reason for opposition is this: progressive education, gentle and lacking in cutting edge though it is thought to be, nevertheless appears as a dangerous attack on the establishment which has to be vigorously resisted. It has to be resisted for many of the same reasons as Christianity had to be resisted by the Romans. It rates truth above authority, persuasion above force, charity above conformity. Conformity, force

and authority have been questioned by moralists ever since moralists began asking questions, and the establishment has persecuted them. Perhaps the reason so many people hate the progressive ideal is that if it is right the whole basis of their lives is false, and they have an uncomfortable feeling that it may be.