
What Has been, What Is and What Might Be: the relevance of the critical writings of Edmond Holmes to contemporary primary education policy and practice

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ABSTRACT Edmond Holmes was His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools from 1905 to 1910. No full biography of Holmes has been published nor any detailed critique of his contribution to the theory and practice of education. Yet his post-retirement observations on education were widely quoted and, in some quarters, very influential. They remain pertinent today in an accountability climate which bears some resemblance to that pertaining in 1911 – the year in which Holmes' most influential book, *What is and What Might Be* [1], was published. Following a brief account of Holmes' career this article focuses on some particularly memorable passages from his educational writing where he criticized policy and practice which he traced back to the period of the Revised Code and its successors and to the shadow it continued to cast a decade or so after its formal abolition. The article also attempts a brief personal commentary on the relevance of Holmes' critique to issues in contemporary policy and practice in primary education – the twenty-first counterpart of elementary education with which he was so closely concerned.

Background

An Irishman, Edmond Holmes was born into a middle-class family in County Westmeath in 1850 and had a brother and a son, both of whom became prominent in educational circles.[2, 3] He was educated in England – at Merchant Taylors School and later at St John's College Oxford where he graduated in 1874 with first classes in classical moderations and literae humaniores. There followed a very short period of teaching – as a master in two public schools (Repton and Wellington) and as a personal tutor in the household of the Earl of Winchilsea. It was the latter who encouraged him to apply for H.M. Inspectorate. He was appointed HMI in 1875 – a typical appointment in terms of his educational background, despite his deployment to the field of elementary education, of which he had no previous first-hand experience as pupil or teacher. This dismissal of the importance of practical

first-hand experience of teaching in the elementary sector continued in HMI during the whole of Holmes' career and was epitomized in the Holmes-Morant Circular itself.

It is probably fair to say that for most of the following century a similar form of negative discrimination informed recruitment to HM Inspectorate with a far higher proportion of inspectors being recruited from public, direct-grant and grammar schools than from elementary schools and their post-1944 successors – primary, secondary modern and early comprehensive schools.[4]

Following his appointment in 1875 he served as an HMI in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Kent, Oxford and Northumberland. There he inspected schools under the Revised Code and its successors ; his duties involved the annual examination of pupils on what he dubbed 'annual parade days' – the system of 'payment by results'. He describes how on April 1 1875:

I was straightway initiated into the administration of the most fatuous and most pernicious educational system that the mind of man ever devised.[5] ... I bore the august title of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools. In reality I was an examiner of the worst possible type.[6, 7]

With disarming honesty (tempered by humour and enhanced by exaggeration) he described the whole of his inspectorate career in very memorable terms:

My life as a school inspector lasted nearly 36 years. During the first 18 or 20 years I did as much mischief in the field of education as I possibly could. I spent the next 10 or 12 years in realizing little by little what mischief I had done. And I spent the last four or five years in making solemn vows of amendment and reparation – vows which since my official death I've been trying to keep.[8, 9]

It was partly as a result of visiting an elementary school in Sompting in 1907 that his work of 'amendment and reparation' received a major impetus. It was there that he met Harriett Finlay-Johnson, the head who as teacher of the fifty oldest pupils had

revolutionized the life, not of the school only, but of the whole village ... I will call her Egeria. She has certainly been my Egeria in the sense that whatever modicum of wisdom in matters educational I may happen to possess, I owe in large measure to her.[10]

Though progressive in his educational thinking he shared some of the prejudices of a man of his race and class. His writing contained a number of racist comments – for example, he referred to 'the existence of races, such as the Negro, which *seem* (my italics) to be far below the normal level of human development'.[11] He pointed to his 'long-held belief in the congenital inferiority of the lower to the middle classes', though he acknowledged that this

assumption was rudely challenged by the pupils in Egeria's school where 'this belief proved to be a mere superstition'. [12] The partial publication of the controversial Holmes-Morant Circular revealed his belief in the greater objectivity and judgement of Oxbridge HMI with no elementary school teaching experience compared with those of Board School inspectors who had requisite elementary school teaching experience.

Following his retirement in 1910 he published widely not only on education but also on literature, poetry and religion. He became a leading light behind the New Education Fellowship dedicated to fostering new ideals, policies and practice in education, in both the maintained and independent sectors. His main educational publications were:

Holmes, E. (1911) *What is and What Might Be*. London: Constable.

Holmes, E. (1913) *The Tragedy of Education*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Holmes, E. (1914) *In Defence of What Might Be*. London: Constable.

Holmes, E. (1920) *In Quest of an Ideal*. London: Cobden Sanderson.

Holmes, E. (1921) *Give Me the Young*. London: Constable.

and a fascinating set of personal reflections:

Holmes, E. (1922) The Confessions and Hopes of an ex-Inspector of Schools, *Hibbert Journal*, XX, 721-739.

Critique of the Possibility of Educational 'Measurement'

His reservations about the possibility of the measurement of children's progress are best illustrated in a number of quotations:

The 'implicit assumption that the real results of education are ponderable and measurable' is 'a deadly fallacy which has now the force and the authority of an axiom' [13]

In proportion as we tend to value the results of education for their measurableness, so we tend to undervalue and at last to ignore those results which are too intrinsically valuable to be measured.[14]

The real 'results' of education are in the child's heart and mind and soul, beyond the reach of any measuring tape or weighing machine.[15]

The younger the child the more delusive is an external examination as a test of mental progress.[16]

Sincerity of expression is not easily measured [17], and the true value of the thoughts and feelings that are struggling to express

themselves in a child's composition is beyond the reach of any rule or scale; whereas neatness of handwriting and correctness of spelling are features which appeal even to the carelessly observant eye.[18]

The first three of these raise an issue of fundamental importance for contemporary assessment practice and reform. Are the outcomes of education, or at least the most important of these, susceptible to 'measurement'? Does it make sense, for example, to talk of measuring conceptual understanding? Is it 'ponderable' to use Holmes' word? Can attitudes or dispositions to learning be 'measured'?

If to measure is to 'ascertain the extent of quantity of a thing by comparison with a fixed unit or with an object of known size' [19] what, if any, are the fixed educational units (and who decides on their fixity) and how far does it make sense of conceptual understanding to regard it as having a size, weight, volume or capacity? The concept of 'measurement' presupposes an 'objective standard' – a reasonably clear and precise standard that can be expressed in words and/or figures which themselves are capable of being interpreted in the same (or at least in a very similar) way by different individuals engaged in the 'measuring' process, whether examiners, inspectors, teachers or the like. Arguably these conditions do not obtain in education and therefore the concept of measurement is inapplicable – a kind of category mistake involving 'the error of ascribing to something of one category a feature attributable only to another (colour to sounds, truth to questions' [20], or, in this case, measurability to conceptual understanding.

Contemporary discussion of the 'measurement' of standards by means of national testing or examinations is thrown into severe doubt. The 'force' and 'authority' of such measurement are questionable. That it is not challenged by governments or by many assessment specialists, that it has in Holmes' word the status of an 'axiom', is not just regrettable but arguably does a fundamental injustice to the nature of the educational enterprise. This is not to argue that conceptual understanding or dispositions to learning cannot be judged or assessed, only that they cannot be measured. They can be, they have to be, judged or assessed by those who possess the relevant criteria acquired through experience – whether they be assessors, inspectors, teachers or the like.

These reservations support those who argue for teacher assessment, rather than national testing, as the most appropriate way of ascertaining children's progress.

The fourth quotation echoes those critics who in the fairly recent past argued against the instigation of national testing for children aged seven and who were instrumental in persuading the government of the day to relegate its use to informing teacher assessment at the end of Key Stage 1. However, the fact that national testing at aged seven remains a feature of contemporary policy is contentious, not only on the grounds of the impossibility of measurement (as outlined above), but also because of the unsuitability of any testing methods involving written tests for children still struggling with, or only having just

emerged from, the formidable tasks of deciphering text and putting their thoughts in written form.

The last quotation neatly encapsulates some of the criticisms currently leveled against national testing in English especially at age eleven. The difficulties of getting agreement over the assessment of style and content, as opposed to the 'surface' features of grammar and punctuation, are regularly rehearsed, especially at the time each year when national test results are issued and discrepancies among markers disclosed. The more fundamental problem of how the value of a child's thoughts and feelings can ever be subject to 'any rule and scale' is less often discussed.

Critique of the Practice of Examination

Holmes' critique of examinations, both during and after the era of 'payment by results', was a major motif in part 1 of *What is and What Might Be*. Conceiving of them as major elements of, and contributors to, what he termed 'the path of mechanical obedience' he railed against what he saw as their pernicious effects in a number of memorable quotations:

The 'belief in the efficacy of examinations is a symptom of a widespread and deep-seated tendency – the tendency to judge according to the appearance of things, to attach supreme importance to visible 'results', to measure inward worth by outward standards, to estimate progress in terms of what the 'world' reveres as 'success.[21]

when information is regarded as the equivalent of knowledge ... it is quite easy to frame an examination which will ascertain, with some approach to accuracy, the amount of information which is floating on the surface of the child's mind; and it is also easy to tabulate the results of such an examination - to find a numerical equivalent for the work done by each examinee, and then arrange the whole class in what is known as the 'order of merit' and accepted as such, without a moment's misgiving, by all concerned.[22]

In a school which is ridden by the examination incubus, the whole atmosphere is charged with deceit. The teacher's attempt to outwit the examiner is deceitful; and the immorality of his action is aggravated by the fact that he makes his pupils partners with him in his fraud.[23]

The more successful the teacher is in keeping up with the examiner, the more fatal will his success be to his pupils and to himself. In the ardour of the chase he is being lured into a region of treacherous quicksands; and the longer he is able to maintain the pursuit, the more certain is it that he will lose himself at last in depths and mazes of misconception and delusion.[24]

I do undoubtedly regard the examination system as the evil genius of modern education. What I condemn is the preparation of children for external examinations, examinations which are held by men who know nothing about the inner life of the school or class they examine, and less than nothing about the individualities of the various scholars, who have one rigid standard for all their examinees, and on whose verdict depends the success or failure (partial if not total) of each school or class as a whole, and also of each individual member of it, so that both teachers and pupils are constantly tempted to look to success in the examination room as the final end of educational effort.[25]

While the system breeds ungrounded and therefore dangerous self-esteem in the child whom it labels as bright, it breeds ungrounded but not the less fatal self-distrust in the child it labels as dull.[26]

The first of these challenges the contemporary assumption that schools can be judged primarily in terms of measurable results, supposedly related to clear, unambiguous, agreed standards. The latter are constantly invoked but rarely if ever defined, except vaguely in reference to examination performance.[27] 'Inward worth', the quality of education, is seen currently as a means to achieving 'standards' rather than as intrinsically important as a major contributor to the quality of life experienced by young people.. It is this 'inward worth' that school inspection at its best can assess, and through the advice of experienced inspectors, enhance.

The second captures the superficiality of much 'pencil and paper' assessment at ages 7 and 11 years – which fails to assess deeper level conceptual understanding but which can be easily be translated into marks (and thence into levels) with their spurious air of precision and authority. Formally constituted and published 'orders of merit' may have disappeared in most, though, I suspect, not all, schools but differentiation of merit by means of level- attributions given to children, is a common feature of contemporary discussion and record-keeping.

Some of the ethical issues raised by test preparation in the current accountability climate are memorably raised in the next two passages. Pressure on teachers to produce results that are used in 'league tables', in Ofsted inspection reports and in brochures to attract parents can too often result in narrow 'teaching to the test' (rather than providing children with their entitlement to a rich educational experience), in a preoccupation with getting children to learn 'tricks of the testing trade' rather than encouraging them to feel satisfaction in the achievement and practice of skills for intrinsic purposes, and in some cases to maladministration of testing procedures verging on, or into, cheating.

Though originally influenced by his experience of undertaking the annual examination of scholars' performance under the Revised Code Holmes' critique of the system of judging a school's, or teacher's or child's effectiveness on the basis of externally set tests or examinations remains a powerful critique of contemporary policy and practice. Adapting the words of Isaiah Berlin [28], though not used in this context, such 'systems are mere prisons of the spirit, and they lead not only to distortion in the sphere of knowledge, but to the erection of monstrous bureaucratic machines, built in accordance with the rules that ignore the teeming variety of the living world, the untidy and asymmetrical inner lives of men(sic), and crush them into conformity for the sake of some ideological chimera unrelated to the union of spirit and flesh that constitutes the real world'. Arguably, examinations may be a necessary evil in the current climate, but as Holmes (and indirectly) Berlin remind us, an evil all the same.

The last quotation in this series brings home the human (but far from humane) consequences of labeling children (whether 'bright' or 'dull', 'level 3' or 'level 5', 'passes' or 'fails'). Writing children off, and worse, their writing off themselves at an early age, has a myriad of dysfunctional consequences for individuals and for society at large which represent a waste of human potential too great for calculation or comprehension.

Critique of the Practice of Inspection

Holmes was very critical of the role of government inspectors in enforcing a regime of 'mechanical obedience' and believed that it was only with abolition of the Revised Code that inspection, properly conceived, could be undertaken. His criticisms were as much directed at his own slavish obedience as to those of his colleagues:

I was a dutiful, industrious and almost ultra-conscientious official...It has been said that custom doth make dotards of us all; and it certainly came near to making a dotard of me.[29]

Inspectors were mere examiners, mere appraisers and tabulators of cut and dried results.[30]

Under 'payment by results' inspectors were not inspectors in the proper sense of the word – observers of ways and works, students of method, critics of the atmosphere, the moral, and the spirit of a school, centres of sympathy and encouragement and friendly advice.[31]

Here Holmes contrasts inspection focusing on the collation and interpretation of what we now call performance data with inspection involving observation, judgment and sympathy and focusing on the quality of education and ways to enhance it. This is a distinction often drawn currently between Ofsted inspection experienced (or endured) since 1992 and old-style HMI inspection

fondly, nostalgically and sometimes mistakenly remembered from the period before then. Though not using Holmes' emotive language many critics of Ofsted [32] argue that its inspection regime focuses unduly on test or examination results and fails to take into account the complex ecology of individual schools and classrooms – with its inspectors too often mindlessly using templates and rule-books rather than their professional judgment in coming to decisions about effectiveness.

The third quotation captures the essence of inspection as an art involving careful observation of life in classrooms, an openness towards alternative forms of practice, evaluation (not measurement) of the qualitative aspects of schooling, an empathetic understanding of teachers and teaching, encouragement of interesting practice, and advice arising from personal experience of a wide variety of schools.

Critique of a Centrally Imposed Curriculum

Holmes had much to say about the deleterious effects of a centrally-imposed, highly prescriptive national syllabus slavishly adhered to at local level:

For a third of a century the Education Department officials required their inspectors to examine every child in every elementary school in England on a syllabus that was binding on all schools alike. In doing this, they put a bit into the mouth of the teacher and drove him, at their pleasure, in this direction and that. And what they did to him they compelled him to do to the child.[33]

The codes issued by the Education Department ... were monuments of bureaucratic ignorance and imbecility. But the syllabuses issued by the local inspectors outcoded the codes. The Education department scourged the teachers and the children with whips. The local inspectors scourged them with scorpions.[34]

When the education given in a school is dominated by a periodical examination on a prescribed syllabus, suppression of the child's natural activities becomes the central feature of the teacher's programme. In such a school the child is not allowed to do anything which the teacher can possibly do for him.[35]

Were the 'Board' to re-institute payment by results, and were they, with this end in view, to entrust the drafting of schemes of work in the various subjects to a committee of the wisest and most experienced educationalists in England, the resultant syllabus would be a dismal failure. For in framing their schemes these wise and experienced educationalists would find themselves compelled to take account of the lowest rather than the highest level of actual educational achievement . What is exceptional and experimental

cannot possibly find a place in a syllabus which is to bind all schools and all teachers alike.[36]

A uniform syllabus is a bad syllabus, for this if for no other reason, that it is compelled to idealise the average; and that, inasmuch as education, so far as it is a living system, grows by means of its 'leaders', the idealization of the average is necessarily fatal to educational growth and therefore to educational life.[37]

These comments raise issues about the English national curriculum, as it has developed since the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 and as it may develop in the immediate future. As a result of the ERA English primary schools were, and still are, required to plan and teach curricula framed by a legal specification – for the first time since the abolition of the insubstantial Elementary Code in 1926. For a decade that national curriculum was pre-empted in operational terms by highly prescriptive national strategies focusing on numeracy and literacy. Only very recently was that very prescriptive approach abandoned, at least in theory, though in practice the continuance of national testing in English and mathematics at age 11 still limits schools' degrees of freedom. The Con-Lib government's plans still envisage a revised national curriculum of some sort for most primary schools, with primary academies and 'free schools' able to opt out (in some undefined way) from some or all of those requirements.

The first three quotations raise the issue of whether the introduction of the original national curriculum unduly constrained schools and teachers in their curriculum planning and practice and children in their learning. That it constrained was undoubtedly the case but not to the extent that, using Holmes' words, it 'drove' teachers 'in this direction and that'. A form of regulated autonomy prevailed. The quotations seem much more apposite when applied to the highly prescriptive national strategies, devised centrally [38] and implemented locally with slavish compliance by advisers and consultants in many (most?) local authorities.

The last two comments make cautionary reading for the new Con-Lib government as it proposes to involve subject experts (presumably amongst the 'wisest and most experienced'?) in revising the national curriculum characterised as 'a minimum national entitlement organised around subject disciplines'. [39] How is the 'minimum' to be determined, by whom and to what effect? Where is 'exceptional and experimental' practice going to be found? Only in primary academies and 'free schools? But to what extent even there given the continuance of national testing? Holmes would almost certainly remain unconvinced of the benefits of such a policy. Hopefully, in the future Ofsted or a replacement inspection body could reclaim enough independence from central government to publicly evaluate that policy and vindicate or refute Holmes' (and my) concerns.

Beyond Critique

This article has focused on Edmond Holmes' critique and has attempted to draw out some parallels with contemporary policy and practice in English primary education. He had his own proposals on the way forward based on a 'philosophy of growth' inspired by Christian theology and Hindu thinking. These proved influential in a small number of so-called 'progressive' schools but informed educational thinking more widely. They deserve sympathetic yet critical scrutiny but in a separate article.

Though critical of much educational policy and practice Holmes remained optimistic, yet realistic:

There is a breath of healthy discontent stirring in the field of elementary education, a breath which sometimes blows the mist away and gives us sudden gleams of sunshine.[40]

The pioneer is abroad in the land, but he(sic) has had, and still has, formidable difficulties to overcome.[41]

Reforming education 'is complex and difficult. And demands much thought, much labour and much patience. Yet the attempt is well worth making; for success in solving it, or even the approach to success, will be abundantly rewarded. I cannot promise a new world within the lifetime of the present generation. The mills of God move very slowly, and the transformation of the ideals of a whole profession is not to be accomplished in a generation or even a century. But that need not discourage us.'[42]

For those schools and teachers feeling isolated and disheartened at current trends Holmes reminds them that they are not alone, that pioneering teachers (female as well as male!) are 'abroad in the land' and that change for the better (however defined) is still possible. They could read Holmes 1911 classic in full [43]. They could take its title as their professional stance: managing the present ('what is') but also working towards a vision of the future ('what might be').

References

- [1] Holmes E (1911) *What is and what might be*, London, Constable
- [2] His son, Maurice Holmes, was Permanent Secretary at the Board of Education from 1937 to 1945 and his brother, Thomas Holmes, was headteacher of St Paul's School.
- [3] He also had a nephew, Gerard Holmes, who was author of *The Idiot Teacher*, an idiosyncratic account of a progressive elementary school headteacher, himself much influenced by Edmond Holmes's thinking.
- [4] A parallel form of negative discrimination, against inspectors with primary and opposed to secondary school experience, has always been applied to promoted

- posts within HMI . For example it was not until the 1970s that the first chief inspector for primary education was appointed who had been a primary head teacher and as late as the late 1980s only three primary specialists had been promoted to take responsibility for areas of work not tied specifically to primary education
- [5] Though also very critical of the system Matthew Arnold, one of his colleagues, used far less emotive language in his reports. These reports were addressed to his 'masters' in the Education Department, whilst Holmes' comments were written for a much wider audience twelve years after his retirement.
- [6] E. Holmes (1922) *The Confessions and Hopes of an ex-Inspector of Schools*, *Hibbert Journal*, XX, 721-739.
- [7] Current HMI working for Ofsted and involved for much of their time in the regulation of the work of additional inspectors might wonder like Holmes how far their job title is a misnomer.
- [8] On a much more pedestrian level my own experience in the inspectorate and later Ofsted mirrors, perhaps less 'darkly' and certainly less memorably, that of Holmes. It is now 14 years after my 'official death'.
- [9] Holmes, 1922, p. 721.
- [10] Holmes, 1911, p. 154.
- [11] Holmes, 1911, p. 302.
- [12] Holmes, 1911, p. 125.
- [13] Holmes, 1911, p. 53.
- [14] Holmes, 1911, p. 129.
- [15] Holmes, 1911, p. 52.
- [16] Holmes, 1922, p. 723.
- [17] Although I would have replaced 'not easily measured' by 'impossible'. I suspect Holmes would have agreed if the point had been argued out with him.
- [18] Holmes, 1911, p.129.
- [19] Thompson, D. (Ed.) (1995) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 9th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [20] Honderich, E. (Ed.) (1995) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [21] Holmes, 1911, p. 9.
- [22] Holmes, 1911, p. 61-62.
- [23] Holmes, 1911, p. 65.
- [24] Holmes, 1911, p. 63.
- [25] Holmes, E. (1914) *In Defence of What Might Be*, p. 26. London: Constable.
- [26] Holmes, 1911, p. 76.
- [27] For an attempt to clarify the concept of 'standards' see C. Richards (2005) *Standards in English Primary Schools: are they rising?* London: Association of

Teachers and Lecturers; and R. Alexander (Ed.) (2010) *Children: their world, their education*, chapter 17. London: Routledge.

- [28] Berlin, I. (1998) *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 251. London: Pimlico.
- [29] Holmes, 1922, p. 726-727.
- [30] Holmes, 1922, p. 727.
- [31] Holmes, 1922, p. 727.
- [32] See for example, Alexander (2010) chapter 17.
- [33] Holmes, 1911, p. 7.
- [34] Holmes, E. (1920) *In Quest of an Ideal*, p. 119. London: Cobden Sanderson.
- [35] Holmes, 1911, p. 66.
- [36] Holmes, 1911, p. 105.
- [37] Holmes, 1911, p. 106.
- [38] Although critical of aspects of the national strategies I cannot bring myself to characterise them in terms of Holmes' 'bureaucratic ignorance and imbecility'.
- [39] Department for Education, press notice, June 7 2010 'Government announces changes to qualifications and the curriculum'.
- [40] Holmes, 1911, pp. v-vi.
- [41] Holmes, 1911, p. 87 .
- [42] Holmes, 1922, p. 739.
- [43] The full text can be freely accessed at <http://www.educationengland.org.uk>

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