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What Could Be – for contemporary policy and practice: challenges posed by the work of Edmond Holmes

COLIN RICHARDS

ABSTRACT In a previous issue of *FORUM* (Volume 52[3], 2010) Colin Richards attempted to apply Edmond Holmes's critique of 1911 to contemporary policy and practice. In this article he discusses the many positive challenges Holmes's work offers a hundred years on.

A century ago Edmond Holmes, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools from 1905 to 1910, made a major contribution to educational debate through his widely quoted and much disputed *What Is and What Might Be* (Holmes, 1911). In a previous article (Richards, 2010) his criticisms of what was then contemporary policy and practice were discussed, as was their pertinence to current policy and practice. Here an attempt is made to discuss *what could be* some of the many positive challenges of his thinking. In assessing these, his fundamental orientation to life in general and to elementary/primary education in particular – his 'metaphysics' – needs to be acknowledged but not necessarily accepted. Many of his ideas have pragmatic value, irrespective of educational or political ideology.

While being very ambitious in his scope and in his aspirations, Holmes was realistic enough to acknowledge the limitations of his thinking in solving the problems of education, which he described as 'obscure, subtle and elusive' (1914, p. 24). He was suitably modest about his own understanding, describing himself as someone who knows 'enough about education to realise how little is or can be known about it' (1911, p. 9). He was also possessed of a keen, gently self-mocking sense of humour which he often used to disarming effect when tackling the critics among his readership, as illustrated by the following:

> Some of my readers happened to know that I was of Irish birth, and had published some volumes of verse. They naturally jumped to the conclusion that I was a wild enthusiast, with no sense of measure, either in praise or blame, and that my picture of the Utopian school, if not largely imaginative, was, to say the least, extravagantly over-coloured. (1914, p. 151)

It is important to stress at the outset what Edmond Holmes was *not* trying to do in *What Is and What Might Be.* He explains that 'This book does not pretend to be a manual of pedagogy' and with typical modesty adds, 'Such a manual I could not write if I would, and I would not write if I could' (1914, p. 95). He was not writing a personal handbook of suggestions or a prescriptive guide to 'best practice'. He was not enunciating a set of policy proposals or providing his own equivalent of a white paper on the importance of teaching. Even less was he reviewing research or proposing a research programme.

As a major contributor to the 1905 Handbook of Suggestions he was a firm believer in the importance of teacher professionalism with respect to pedagogy. He fully subscribed to what might be seen as the most eloquent statement ever made of professional autonomy; he may even have had a hand in drafting this passage himself:

> The only uniformity of practice that the Board of Education desire to see in the teaching of Public Elementary Schools is that each teacher shall think for himself, and work out for himself such methods of teaching as may use his powers to the best advantage and be best suited to the particular needs and conditions of the school. Uniformity in details of practice (except in the mere routine of school management) is not desirable, even if it were attainable. But freedom implies a corresponding responsibility in its use. (Board of Education, 1905, pp. 3-4)

In his *In Defence of What Might Be* (1914) he was quite clear about his intentions in the earlier book:

> My book embodies an attempt to diagnose a grave malady, and to indicate the general direction in which a remedy is to be found, or at any rate sought … My aim in writing about education is to set people thinking; and the proof that a man has been set thinking is that he has begun to think for himself. Those who are thinking for themselves will not want me to think for them, and will, therefore, regard the suggestions which I have formulated as more or less superfluous. (1914, p. 106)

Holmes's 'Metaphysics'

Unlike other reviews of elementary/primary education (the Hadow Report of 1931, the Plowden Report of 1967 or the Cambridge Review of 2009),

Holmes went back to fundamental principles in developing his arguments. His thinking was as much a metaphysics as a philosophy of education, and draws on Christian, Buddhist and Hindu elements. He viewed human nature as a living and indivisible whole, organic and interdependent, involving body, mind, heart and soul, with a particular emphasis on the centrality of the soul and on the intrinsic potential for good in every human being. He saw the function of education as the fostering of the growth of the soul, which he characterised as 'the nature of Man considered in its unity and totality – no more than this, and no less' (1911, p. 83). He acknowledged that such a view ran counter to contemporary Western (though not, he argued, all aspects of Eastern) civilisation, which he characterised as being 'based on the belief that the end of Man's being is not the growth of his soul, but the growth of his balance at the bank of material prosperity' (p. 81).

Very knowledgeable about Christian theology, he was deeply critical of the doctrine of original sin and its concomitant view of human nature as corrupt, ruined, intrinsically evil and requiring salvation through blind and mechanical obedience to ecclesiastical authority. He argued strongly that 'What is central in human nature is not its inborn wickedness but its infinite capacity for good, not its rebellious instincts and backsliding tendencies, but its many-sided efforts to achieve perfection' (1911, p. 205). He stressed that unthinking submission to authority, whether ecclesiastical, political or educational, led to an emphasis on 'correct' conduct and 'correct' belief – a 'path of mechanical obedience' strongly fostered by contemporary educational policy and practice. He was deeply influenced by his reading of the Upanishads and by the teaching of Buddha, whom he regarded as 'the greatest educationalist, as well as the greatest moralist, that the world has ever known' (1911, p. 307). He was quite clear about the source of the malady affecting education:

> The conclusion which I reached was that the ultimate source of the defects and aberrations of Western education was to be sought in the externalisation of Western civilisation, its undue regard for what is outward, visible and measurable, a tendency which, as it seemed to me, was at once the product, the expression and the cause of a radical misconception of the meaning and value of life. (1914, p. 95)

No attempt is made here to assess the validity or otherwise of Holmes's metaphysics; indeed, in Holmes's own words, 'such a manual I could not write if I would, and I would not write if I could'! But it *is* significant that Holmes rooted his analysis of contemporary policy and practice in terms of very fundamental principles and concepts. References to 'soul', 'salvation' or 'sin' are rarely, if ever, found in mainstream non-sectarian discussions of education policy and practice. But equally rare is sustained, critical examination of concepts such as 'human nature', 'human potential', 'ability', 'attainment', 'development' or 'the nature of childhood'. Perhaps those basic concepts should be re-examined – and Holmes's thinking could usefully inform that process.

Education as Growth

Holmes's positive contribution to educational thinking centred on the notion of 'growth'. His 'growth philosophy' was expressed in a number of vividly written passages, including the following:

> It is the whole human being that grows, the whole nature of the child – body, mind, heart and soul. (1911, p. 163)
>
> The business of the teacher is to help the child to grow, healthily, vigorously and symmetrically, on all the planes of his being. (1911, p. 200)
>
> The process of growing must be done by the growing organism, by the child, let us say, and by no one else … The one thing that no one may ever delegate to another is the business of growing. (1911, p. 4)
>
> Inward and spiritual growth, even if it were thought desirable to produce it and measure it, could not possibly be measured. The real 'results' of education are in the child's heart and mind and soul, beyond the reach of any tape or weighing machine. (1911, p. 52)
>
> Every child ought to be free to develop himself, fully and harmoniously, on all the planes of his being. Such a state of things does not exist; and would, I hardly need to say, be extremely difficult to bring about. But it is an ideal which we ought to try to realise. (1914, p. 59)

White (2007) argues that Holmes was a naïve growth theorist who took the idea of growth, familiar and apposite in physical/biological contexts, but also applied it to intellectual, social and spiritual development, where its relevance and aptness are far more contentious. In the latter contexts, White contends, cultural values come into play and learners' needs cannot simply be 'read across' from observable physical characteristics. This, however, does less than justice to the subtlety of Holmes's arguments in which he did recognise the mediating influence of culture, which can define, promote or constrain 'growth'. Whatever the epistemological issues raised by 'education as growth', the passages above challenge much contemporary policy.

As illustrated by the first two quotations, Holmes's concern was for the broad development of the learner 'on all the planes of his being' – not a narrow concentration on two tested subjects as in Blunkett's post-1998 'neo-elementary curriculum', nor on a limited number of 'subject disciplines', the sort of 'elementary Bac' assumed to be of particular importance in the terms of reference of the current curriculum review (Richards, 2011). Elsewhere he characterised that broad development in terms of the qualities to be fostered in learners – 'activity, versatility, imaginative sympathy, a large and free outlook, self-forgetfulness, charm of manner, joy of heart' (1911, p. 231) – terms in danger of appearing antiquated, but which bear re-examination a century on.

His view of all-round development involved the interplay of cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects, none more important, more 'basic',

than any other; none more privileged than any other in terms of the time and attention devoted to it during a child's primary education. Holmes's notion of 'symmetrical' growth is akin to that much used and abused notion of 'balance' with its value-laden implications. He invites us to reconsider the shibboleths of 'breadth' and 'balance' which have been used too uncritically since the *Curriculum Matters* series of the mid 1980s, and which will almost certainly feature prominently, in some form or other, in the final report from the current curriculum review. Holmes clearly articulated the values that informed his view of healthy, vigorous, 'symmetrical' development; he challenges us to articulate ours in anticipation of the curriculum review findings, which will almost certainly assume a value-consensus that may well be spurious.

The third quotation, though a truism, contains some important insights. Only children can learn; teachers cannot learn for them. Only children can develop conceptual understanding; it cannot be 'drilled' into them through the memorisation or regurgitation of 'facts' beloved of the current government. Only children can develop the wide range of skills needed to act on the world; they can be given instruction to help skill development, but they have to internalise it, make it their own, see the relevance of the skills they are acquiring to their own or others' concerns. Holmes did not deny that teaching, whether by adults or more capable peers, was important for children's learning but he anticipated the notion of the co-construction of understanding by teachers and learners, with the former as facilitators but the latter as final arbiters of what is learned. While not denying the importance of either of the following alternatives, he placed the emphasis on learning rather than teaching, on the activity rather than the passivity of the learner, and on transaction and interaction rather than transmission and reception.

The fourth quotation raises questions over the desirability as well as the conceivability of capturing the outcomes of education through measurements of some kind. His severe reservations about the susceptibility of 'growth' to measurement have been rehearsed and supported elsewhere (Richards, 2010). Here he also raises the issue of whether we ought to measure all educational outcomes, even if we could. The proponents of the current testing regime clearly believe it tests the most important educational outcomes but have not raised any principled objections to extending testing further except on the grounds of expense and practicability. Critics complain about the deleterious, limiting effects of current testing and some argue for a 'system for summarising, reporting and accrediting children's performance that provides information about *all* aspects of learning' (Alexander, 2009, p. 498). But setting aside questions of logical impossibility and of practicality, how desirable would such a comprehensive system be? Why should *every* aspect be subject to surveillance, assessment and reporting to others? Why should children's learning be subject to a degree of scrutiny never applied to adults? What privacy rights do children have over the disclosure of their own skills and understandings? The limitations to be placed on assessment and testing are not confined to issues of

epistemology and practicability, but extend to such ethical issues too. These are rarely, if ever, debated. They should be.

The fifth quotation acknowledges the extreme difficulty of realising full, harmonious development, though it is unclear whether Holmes saw this difficulty in terms of logical impossibility, or practical impossibility, or both. He was, however, committed to the educability of each and every child. His commitment to this ideal, however difficult of realisation, was unshaken; it provided the lodestar for the educational journey, however difficult that might prove to be. He challenges current policy makers and professionals to frame an equally or more compelling lodestar or vision – far removed from the empty 'motherhood and apple pie' aims in the Education Reform Act of 1988 or the vapid clichés trotted out in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010).

The Role of the Teacher

A major weakness among those advocating greater freedom and self-expression for children has been the absence of an explicit, worked-through and exemplified role for the teacher, involving a pedagogy which is more than a series of unhelpful generalisations, whether Piagetian, Vygotskian or whatever. This is at last being remedied, at least in part (Hart et al, 2004; Drummond, 2010), but a century earlier Holmes himself only hinted at a practical, principled pedagogical model. His descriptions of the head teacher's 'growth-focused' practice in 'A School in Utopia' (1911) are 'thin', rather than 'thick', partial rather than comprehensive, allusive rather than direct – tantalisingly so. However, some of his principles are very clear.

> What task will the teacher who believes in freedom set himself at the outset? He will make it his first aim to prepare the way for the willing cooperation of the child in his education. This will take the form of releasing him from all pressure which is needless and injurious, which is coercive for the mere sake of coercion; and on the other hand of making him feel he is trusted and believed in and that his goodwill is taken for granted. The next step is to provide him, to help him provide himself, with an attractive programme of school organisation and schoolwork – a programme that will so appeal to the child that he will of his own accord go forth to meet it and welcome it. (1921, p. 61)
>
> Freedom is limited in two main directions. In the first place, the child has to make his choice among a number of things which are well worth doing. In the second place, he must so use his freedom as to not to interfere with the freedom of his companions. (1914, p. 63)
>
> If the child is to be free to choose, and free to abide by his choice, the adult must take care that the things among which he chooses are all worth choosing. (1914, p. 62)

> To give free play to a child's natural faculties, and so lead him into the path of self-development and self-education, demands a high degree of intelligence on the part of the teacher, combined with the constant exercise of thought and initiative within a wide range of free action. (1914, p. 68)
>
> The teacher must … content himself with giving the child's expansive instincts fair play and free play; and, for the rest, he must as far as possible efface himself, bearing in mind that not he, but the child, is the real actor in the drama of school life. (1911, p. 164)

In the first extract, Holmes reiterates a number of his fundamental assumptions – that children have an intrinsic capacity for good, that they are naturally and willingly cooperative and that they need to be trusted and believed in. He believed that teachers' pedagogy should reflect those assumptions – a situation very different from the generality of practice he observed in the elementary schools of his day. How different too, a century on, from the generality of current policy and practice in post-Foundation Stage education, which, heightened by the testing regime and its ramifications, too often stresses extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation, too often employs negative 'deficit' models of childhood and too often relies on 'pressure which is needless and injurious'. Holmes would have been appalled (but not surprised) at the squandering of so much child goodwill and ready cooperation in the service of external 'measures' of success, as exemplified in test and other assessment data. He challenges us to consider how much pressure we apply to children 'which is coercive for the mere sake of coercion', and whether our first priority should not be to secure the 'willing cooperation of the child in his education', a cooperation so clearly evident in many children in the Foundation Stage, but too often squandered later.

The second and third quotations imply an important but subtle role for the teacher. S/he has to create the conditions in which children can learn, which includes giving them a degree of choice of what to learn from a range of activities believed to be of value as judged by the teacher. Unfortunately, Holmes was not explicit about whether some activities are so important as not to be subject to the choice of the child. Nor did he indicate how far children should be given scope to pursue those activities in directions of their own choosing, but presumably these directions would have to be 'worth' pursuing as judged by the teacher. He was not advocating a totally open-ended programme; there were adult-imposed limits; there were constraints – not least in terms of children not encroaching on others' freedom of choice. But in contrast to the detailed prescriptions of the New Labour era he *did* advocate considerable choice and considerable room for negotiation between teacher and child. He challenges us to reconsider the concept of choice in the new political context supposedly characterised by freedom of pedagogy for teachers. Will teachers be 'free', for example, to give children the 'degrees of freedom' recommended by

Holmes? Should those 'degrees' be more or less constrained than Holmes recommended?

The remaining two quotations in this section capture, if elusively, the subtlety, flexibility and practical intelligence necessary in a pedagogy offering a degree of choice to children. The difficulty in characterising that pedagogy other than through vapid generalisations has resulted in many misinterpretations since Holmes articulated his principles. For example, it underlay the superficial, ill-understood adoption of so-called child-centred practices by too many schools in the late 1960s and 70s. It provided a ready-made caricature for the critics of child-centred education. Judging from Schools Minister Nick Gibb's ill-informed comments it still does! The challenge for those believing that children do need a measure of choice and a degree of independence in their learning is to provide not just principles of procedure (Stenhouse, 1975), though we do need more discussion of these, but also 'thick' descriptions and in-depth analyses which do justice to teaching despite the apparent 'effacement' of the teacher.

The Curriculum

As the first quotation in the previous section illustrates, Holmes also stresses the necessity of providing, or helping the child to provide, 'an attractive programme of schoolwork – a programme that will so appeal to the child that he will of his own accord go forth to meet it and welcome it' (1921, p. 61). He makes no reference to a nationally stipulated programme of study; elsewhere he is sceptical about the usefulness of 'outside' prescriptions (Richards, 2010). He does not expect teachers and pupils to work to these; instead he expects a degree of negotiation between teacher and pupil in what is taught and learned, though within adult-influenced limits.

The following extracts capture a selection of his general observations and of some particular activities he observed and commended in that very real school, 'Utopia', led by its real teacher, 'Egeria'.

> We must observe young children, and study their ways and works.
> (1911, p. 164)
> We need not to be very careful observers of young children in order to satisfy ourselves that, apart from physical nourishment and exercise there are six things which the child instinctively desires, namely:
> (1) to talk and listen
> (2) to act (in the dramatic sense of the word)
> (3) to draw, paint and model
> (4) to dance and sing
> (5) to know the why of things
> (6) to construct things.
> (1911, pp. 164-165)

> No subject, apart from those which I have spoken of as intrinsically delightful (i.e. drawing, dancing and singing) is taught for its own sake. Subjects are taught there either as the means to desired ends, or because they afford opportunities for the training of the expansive instincts, the gratification of which is a pure pleasure to every healthy child. (1911, p. 212)
>
> In Utopia free conversation is systematically encouraged … Children write letters in school, to real people. When an interesting phenomenon is noticed … the children are accustomed to discuss it in groups, and to try to think out among themselves its cause and meaning. (1911, pp. 172-173)
>
> The child must observe closely and attentively. He must reflect on what he observes. He must reflect on what he himself is doing. (1911, p. 177)
>
> In the nature lesson every child has a specimen and a lens. The object is then closely and carefully observed, in the hope of discovering features in it which might escape the unobservant. Whenever such features are discovered the children try to account for them. (1911, p. 185)
>
> Every subject that admits of dramatic treatment is systematically dramatised … [The children] act the scene, putting their own interpretation on the various parts, and receiving the stimulus and guidance of Egeria's sympathetic criticism. (1911, pp. 174-175)
>
> Children are allowed, and even expected, to seek for illumination whenever they find themselves in the dark, to pause inquiringly at every obstacle to their understanding what they have seen or heard or read. (1911, p. 184)
>
> Reading, writing and arithmetic are means to ends beyond themselves, ends which are constantly presenting themselves to the Utopian. (1911, p. 211)

As the first quotation stresses, Holmes believed that the curriculum should be designed and transacted in the light of what we know of child development. He was perhaps somewhat naïve in assuming that 'reading' children's development is a neutral, value-free activity, when in reality cultural values are inevitably implicated. However, our knowledge of child development (and our acknowledgement of its cultural underpinning) have increased greatly since his day and many would argue need to be drawn upon currently when recommending future policy and practice with regard to the school curriculum.

Though his curriculum recommendations (in the second quotation) are not value-free, and are based on what is now seen as an outdated psychological model of 'instinct', they are still very pertinent in informing a general framework for the primary curriculum a century later. Indeed, his concept of the child's 'desires' might profitably be resurrected in current curriculum discourse. If his observations were to be submitted as evidence to the curriculum review

set up in January 2011 (Department for Education), the centrality of oracy – talking, listening, acting and singing – would be very evident. So would the importance of the creative arts – drawing, painting, dancing and acting (again). Though not named as such, science and the humanities ('to know the why of things') and technology would also be seen as essential, as would physical education. The third quotation emphasises the importance of designing that curriculum in relation to 'desired ends', rather than seeing it as simply a vehicle for the teaching of particular subjects, presumed to be self-evidently valuable. Michael Gove take note!

The remaining quotations give tantalising glimpses of the curriculum, teaching and learning that Holmes so admired in the school he called 'Utopia', and that, arguably, should feature as important components of a properly conceived primary education today. They include:

- conversation, discussion and writing for a purpose;
- close observation;
- self-reflection and meta-cognition;
- drama;
- inquiry learning;
- the 'proper' place of reading, writing and arithmetic as means to ends, not ends in themselves.

Will such aspects find a significant place in the content-dominated curriculum sought by the current government? It seems hardly likely – but Edmond Holmes would not have been surprised, though he would have been disappointed.

Conclusion

According to the remit letter setting up the review of the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2011), the new curriculum should draw upon 'the most successful international curricula in the highest performing jurisdictions' (thus begging the question of what constitutes 'success' and 'high performance'). The Government goes on to insist that it should also 'embody our cultural and scientific heritage; the *best* that our past and present generations have to pass on to the next' (my italics). That heritage surely ought to include due consideration of the observations of wise educationalists such as Edmond Holmes.

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COLIN RICHARDS is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cumbria and a sub-editor and contributory author to the *Cambridge Review of Primary Education.* He has been an honorary professor at the University of Warwick and a visiting professor at the universities of Leicester and Newcastle. He is chair of governors of a Cumbrian secondary school which has twice decided not to pursue academy status. As a critic of much (though not all) of government education policy (both New Labour and Coalition) he is a frequent contributor to the national press, particularly to the *Education Journal* and to the *Times Educational Supplement* where he has had two hundred articles and letters published. He treasures the epithet 'an old-fashioned HMI', bestowed by a former Chief Inspector of Schools.
Correspondence: colin@sparkbridge.freeserve.co.uk