

Teaching has become a debased activity according to the Chief Inspector of Schools:

"In nine schools out of ten, on nine days out of ten, in nine lessons out of ten, the teacher is engaged in laying thin films of information on the surface of the child's mind and then after a brief interval he is skimming these off in order to satisfy himself that they have been duly laid".

These observations of the Chief Inspector of Schools, made in the early 1900s, can hardly fail to sound a controversial note in the UK today. At present it is quite hard for anyone to suggest that there may be more to education than a ceaseless quest for a better way to force-feed information to children.

But the man who was responsible for supervising the first National Curriculum of the early 1900s, was the Senior Chief Inspector, Edmond Holmes. He wrote a report in which he condemned all that he had been doing for the last thirty years, and admitted his sense of shame for being a part of it. He had to resign as a result of telling the truth as he saw it. He went on to write two books establishing his case, but his inconvenient views were quietly buried. *"He appears in histories of education as a footnote, or as one whose ideas are acknowledged but never allowed into the main current of thinking, either in his own time or later,"* writes Chris Shute in his recent book *Edmond Holmes and the Tragedy of Education*.

If England wanted to have an education system fit for a new century, Holmes declared, it would have to stop telling children what to do and compelling them to do it, since this produced only passivity, lassitude, unhealthy docility or, in the stronger, more determined spirits, 'naughtiness'. Uniformity was just plain bad education.

Holmes wrote of the *"tendency (of the examination system) to arrest growth, to deaden life, to paralyse the higher faculties ... to involve education in an atmosphere of unreality and self-deception."* He called this system a source of 'infinite mischief' which obscured the true purposes of education.

One of the most disturbing features of the current educational scene is the likelihood that we shall now enter the next century with the same basic model of mass, uniform, conscription-based schooling that Holmes saw as a tragedy. The battery-hen, 'tell them then test them' approach still reigns supreme. Holmes was a committed Christian and saw all this as unchristian; if God had intended us for uniformity, we would have been created so, as in the case of ants or bees. Therefore he saw the imposition of a uniform curriculum on children by adults as an affront to his religion.

Holmes was not the only whistle-blower. Bertrand Russell wrote: *"There must be in the world many parents who, like the present author, have young children whom they are anxious to educate as well as possible, but reluctant to expose to the evils of existing educational institutions."* Also, Albert Einstein observed that, *"It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail."*

Another whistle-blower, Winston Churchill had this to say on the matter: *"Schools have not necessarily much to do with education ... they are mainly institutions of control where certain basic habits must be instilled in the young. Education is quite different and has little place in*

school." Education officials responsible for the drafting of 1988 Education Reform Act, which re-established the 1904 form of curriculum, also wanted 'institutions of control' for they were recorded as saying: *"We are in a considerable period of social change. There may be social unrest, but we can cope with the Toxteths. But if we have a highly educated and idle population we may possibly anticipate more serious social conflict. People must be educated once more to know their place."*

Are there any current glimmers of hope? Well there are several. The first and most radical is the home-schooling movement which, based on the growth rate of the last 20 years, is now expected to account for 25% of the USA school-age population by the year 2008. UK appears to be running about five years behind.

The second is flexi-time. By 2008 there may be a further 25% on flexi-time arrangements - 65,000 families are reported as taking up the options of ISPs (Independent Study Programmes) this year, in California alone.

Thirdly, the Charter Schools movement has been growing apace in USA in the last five years, modelled on the Danish and Dutch models. Here groups of parents, sometimes in co-operatives with teachers, set up small schools or local learning centres with State aid. My USA colleagues tell me that President Clinton is strong in his support for this movement,

Fourthly, most USA States have made a start in replacing schools with All Year Round Education Centres which open eight in the morning until eight at night, every day of the year. These centres are able to offer much more flexibility in learning opportunities to fit the needs of individuals, families and adult learners and much more flexible contracts for teachers. These institutions are also in a position to offer ISPs .

A catalyst in these developments can be, and often is, communications and information technology (CIT) which enables the development of cyber schools, learning networks, virtual schools and other flexible, computer linked possibilities. CIT also allows initiatives with truants. In Japan, teachers communicate with truants using e-mail and multimedia technology, sometimes holding video conferences with the children. The feedback has so far been positive. Michael Fitzpatrick, in *Times Educational Supplement*, 10/4/98 reports that the approach stems from the view that bullying and the pressure to succeed are driving pupils to truancy. Bullied students who commit suicide inevitably become headline news.

Another glimmer of hope is contained in the words of Prime Minister Tony Blair that I mentioned in a previous edition: *"... the revolution in business ... will, over time, take place in education, too. We will move away from a system that assumes every child of a particular age moves at the same pace in every subject, and develop a system directed to the particular talents and interests of every pupil."*

These words carry a serious implication. If he can envisage a better system of learning, what are we waiting for? Are the present generation of young learners being fobbed off with a second-rate experience for no good reason? Why is he tolerant of the current Chief Inspector of Schools devoted to the regressive ideology of education based on fear and domination, that Holmes despised?

What can parents do about all this? Our local councillors, national politicians and journalists need to be educated about these things. Letters to newspapers asking questions about these

matters, even when they are not published, help influence opinion and so do letters to MPs. Introducing these idea into conversations also helps. The growth of home-based education, for example, has taken place mostly by word of mouth and through a trickle of newspaper and magazine articles. Why not ask your MP about the words of Tony Blair and their implications? I would be interested to have copies of any replies.

Later this year, Falmer Press will be publishing a new whistle-blower book entitled *National Curriculum, National Disaster* by Rhys Griffiths, based on several years field work. There are strong echoes in this work of the denunciation of the first national curriculum by Edmond Holmes. Get hold of a copy, read it and start a debate about it.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead encourages us: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

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Edmond Holmes and 'The Tragedy of Education' by Chris Shute, ISBN 1-900219-12-3, published by Educational Heretics Press, costs £7-95, from 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ

Roland Meighan, March 1999