Baroness Mary Warnock in Conversation with Liam Lawlor

In 1978 a committee chaired by Baroness Mary Warnock published a report entitled: 'Special Educational Needs – Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People'. The Warnock report, as it became known, was the first review of educational provision for all children with special educational needs (SEN) in the UK since 1889. The focus of this article is a recently recorded conversation between Baroness Warnock and the author where her thoughts and opinions on SEN provision then and now are explored.

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BACKGROUND TO THE WARNOCK REPORT

In 1973, in England and Wales a committee chaired by Mary Warnock was established to enquire into 'the education of handicapped children and young people'. The resulting Warnock report (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1978) was a major benchmark in relation to the education of children and young people with SEN. It was the first enquiry to review educational provision for handicapped children in the U.K. since 1889. In Britain, the 1944 Education Act established a model of education for all except the 'ineducable', according to their age, aptitude and ability. Eleven categories of pupils with 'handicaps' were established under this model and these pupils were educated under separate provision, often in special schools. The considerations of the Warnock committee were based on the philosophy that all children and young adults were entitled to an education whatever their disabilities, and stressed the importance of a person's educational need rather than his or her disability. Among the issues considered were categorisation, integration, 'continuum of provision for a continuum of need', early education, assessment, teacher training, and financial resources.

The report was published in 1978, three years after the enactment of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (Department of Education, 1975) in the United States. This US law required states to provide 'free appropriate public education' for children and young people with disabilities aged three to twenty-one. It is reasonable to assume that the Warnock Committee was aware of, and was influenced by, developments in the US. The Warnock report embraced many concepts similar to those enshrined in US law, such as that the education of children with disabilities should take place in mainstream schools to a maximum extent appropriate, taking into account the child's needs (Florian and Pullin, 2000). It also elaborated on this concept by identifying

different forms of integration as locational, social or functional. Warnock also embraced the radical and challenging concept that learning disability was not limited to 2% but up to 20% of children might experience some form of learning difficulties during their school years. It also decided to replace the existing multiple categories of disability with the general term SEN and this term appears in the title of the report. The report did emphasise education in the mainstream *where possible* but the subsequent law (DES, 1981) outlined three qualifications to this, thus embracing the concept of a continuum of provision. The report was extremely well received by professionals and policy makers, as evidenced by the incorporation of many of its ideas into the subsequent 1981 Education Act in the UK.

While over time certain reservations about the Warnock report began to appear it became clear that the report marked a significant turning point in special education thinking and the organisation of the delivery of special education provision not only in the UK but also in Ireland (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). The most noteworthy development in this island similar to the publication of the Warnock report was the decision to establish the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in 1991 some thirteen years later. The SERC report (Ireland, 1993), flagged among other things the importance of future educational legislation, wherein the educational rights of all children would be established. This legislation was introduced as the Education Act 1998 (Ireland, 1998). This Act was followed in quick succession by the Education (Welfare) Act (Ireland, 2000), Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Ireland, 2005). The EPSEN Act established the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with responsibility for most aspects of SEN provision, including the provision of resources and supports to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available. The Act also introduced the role of the special educational needs organiser (SENO) who would provide a localised service with responsibility for identification, assessment and resource provision, areas which prior to this were the responsibility of the inspectorate within the DES.

In mid-2005 Baroness Mary Warnock, published a pamphlet calling for a rethink on special needs and integration now known as inclusion (Warnock, 2005). She appeared to do an about-turn and stated that the way in which mainstream schools cared for children with special needs was ‘a disastrous waste of money’. She suggested that inclusion had gone too far too quickly. She also expressed a view that special schools had a place within the continuum of provision for the education of some children.

This support for a continuum of provision for a continuum of special need remains as constant today as when it was first outlined in the Warnock report some thirty years ago.

INTERVIEW

The following interview outlines the thoughts and opinions of the Baroness then and now and may challenge us to a re-appraisal of our SEN provision. It was recorded by Liam Lawlor, member of the Leadership Development for Schools team, in Baroness Warnock's office at the House of Lords, London on November 10th, 2008 for the inaugural North/South Symposium for principals of special schools. This joint Leadership Development for Schools (LDS)/Regional Training Unit (RTU) symposium was held in Sligo on the December 4th and 5th 2008. The video of the conversation was relayed to the conference.

L.L. Would you paraphrase, for our principals attending the conference, what special education was like in the United Kingdom prior to 1978?

B.W. Special education had changed very radically in this country in the 1970s, when all children were deemed to have a right to education. Before that, some were thought to be ineducable, but now all children were brought in to the responsibility of education, not health. So we were faced with a large population of children who'd never been educated before. I think that is why the then Secretary of State for Education, who was Margaret Thatcher, decided that a look at the whole system was called for. Really teachers didn't quite know what to do with these children who had not been educated before. Special education was very much marked off from the whole of the rest of education. Children were identified according to what was wrong with them, what their disability was, and once identified and assessed they were then put in suitable special schools. So I think what happened in 1974, when my committee was set up, was a radical new look at how children, all of them, whatever their disabilities, should be educated.

L.L. Is it fair to say that the Warnock report advocated a greater degree of integration of pupils with SEN into mainstream classes?

B.W. I think it's slightly misleading to say that the committee advocated a greater integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream classes. I think our real aim was to try to widen the scope of the concept of special education. There were at the time about 2% of school age children in special schools, and we worked out, or the department worked out for us, that actually there were about 20% of children who needed extra help if they were to be able to learn. That meant of course, that 2% of children in special schools certainly had special needs but so did 18%, of children who were already in mainstream schools. What we really wanted to do was to make it absolutely certain that those children, that 18%, were not missed out, that they too were recognised as having special needs. So yes, there were going to be far more children with special needs in mainstream schools but many of them were there already and not in

special schools. That was, I think, the major change and it did make a huge difference because it meant that having SEN didn't set you apart altogether from the rest of your contemporaries. There were a lot of parents of children with quite severe learning difficulties who said to me that it had made a huge difference to the acceptability of their children in society as a whole.

L.L. Some state you voiced a u-turn in the nineties suggesting that inclusion had gone too far or had the Warnock report's concept of a *continuum of provision for a continuum of need* **been overlooked?**

B.W. I think it was the case that people misread the report and as years went by, they forgot that there was an insistence in the report on a continuum of provision and a continuum indeed of disability. None of the members of the committee ever envisaged that special schools should be abolished and that we should try to integrate absolutely all children, whatever their needs, in the mainstream or in ordinary classrooms. But I think that concepts change as the years go on and people forget how they started. I did spend quite a lot of time in the nineties saying 'No, I hadn't done a u-turn'. I had actually just been saying that people had gone too far and too fast with the - what we used to call integration - what's now called inclusion and that, if people looked back at the report itself, they would see that we never did say that all children, whatever their disabilities, should be educated in the mainstream. But I think that the very bad thing that has happened, and I don't quite see how this could have been avoided, is that people, not teachers, but ministers and other people from the outside tended to talk as though SEN were a category of children that was uniform and for whom one kind of provision would do for all of them. That, I think, is a profound and very damaging mistake.

L.L. Should the rights of children with SEN be enshrined in legislation?

B.W. I think there are disadvantages in having legislation in that legislation tends to be rigid. There may be many children who don't quite fit in whatever categories or provisions laid down in the law. At the same time, I feel very strongly that these children are the most liable to be neglected if there is no legislation and that we do need, every country needs legislation, to protect their right, their entitlement to education which is a human right. If there are difficult economic times ahead and if money is short, these are the children who are likely to suffer if there's nothing in the law that absolutely protects their entitlement to education. So I think, yes, legislation really must be in place.

L.L. When teaching pupils with SEN can 'one size fit all'?

B.W. I'd like to go on about the evils of treating SEN all together as one. People talk a lot about how good it is for a mainstream school, how good it is for the pupils who are not disabled to have acquaintance and knowledge of pupils who are disabled and how the whole school benefits from the policy of inclusion. I go along with that up to a point, but only up to a point, because I don't think it's very easy for some children with disabilities, particularly those with invisible disabilities, to feel that they are contributing to the

school, to feel that they are part of the school. They may be physically included in the school but emotionally they may be excluded. That includes the fact that they may be subject to bullying which is incredibly difficult to stamp out. A school may have a policy of no bullying but, nevertheless, there may be children within that school who feel themselves to be different, who know that they don't make friends the way other people make friends, who know that there are lots of things that they can't do. They may often be excluded from school expeditions and those kinds of school activities. But it's the bullying that I fear most especially for the children who are emotionally very, very fragile. I do think that those children flourish best in small schools where it's far easier to ensure that they feel that they belong. I do think that inclusion is partly that of the emotions. You can be geographically with the other children but you may still feel yourself to be a total pariah, a total exile, a hopeless person in the school and who may well suffer from overt bullying and I feel this very strongly for the children who are emotionally fragile.

L.L. Is the overemphasis on location in danger of overshadowing the issues of 'how to teach' and 'what to teach'?

B.W. I think there is a grave danger that when the outside world hears about a child with special educational needs, or with a disability, they immediately envisage a wheelchair and they think, 'Oh, well, the school has got to adapt its physical, geographical arrangements so that wheelchairs can have access' and, of course, we all agree with that. I think that physical disabilities, even quite severe disabilities, are relatively easy for a school to manage and children recognise their colleague who is disabled, and on the whole, are very nice to him/her. What mainstream pupils are not nice to, are children who behave oddly or can't keep up in class or who are a nuisance or even appear to be sort of clinging to their fellow pupils because they don't understand that their behaviour is inappropriate. Neither are they considerate to children who are just disruptive and have emotional disabilities rather than intellectual disabilities. These are the children who, I think, may well have to be educated either all the time, or for part of their school career, in a special school where their behaviour, as much as their intellect could be gradually, and lovingly, adapted to what people find acceptable.

L.L. Our National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has recently reviewed special education. Do you have any advice for the researchers of the project?

B.W. First, I think you are extremely fortunate to have a National Council, which is starting off as it were a radical review of the provision of special needs and what provision there ought to be. I wish we had. I think it's high time that we had another national review and, and really this is one of the things that I feel strongly about in this country. The time has come for us to look at it again because we are still tinkering with the law here. We are still relying on the 1981 Education Act which was what came out of my report all those years ago. I feel like saying to Ministers;

> *Well look, this is ages ago now and things have changed, we've learnt more, we've identified different disabilities, we're much better at knowing how to educate children according to individual needs if only we could have a chance for fresh legislation to see the way ahead.*

So I think you're very lucky, that's the first thing.

The second thing I think, and this is something I keep going on about, we must recognise the difference between children with different disabilities. To take the case of a child with Aspergers, I don't think there is any possibility of such children necessarily being able to learn in a mainstream school. It's largely a matter of the size of the school because one thing that children with Aspergers cannot bear is crowds, rushing about, being accidentally banged into, the noise, the visual and auditory input that comes all the time in a big school. It's being propelled around the playground, running up and down the corridors. It is absolute death to an autistic child to have all this sensory input; they can't deal with it and, therefore, what such a child needs, and many of them are very, very clever intellectually or artistically gifted or musically gifted that they essentially need a small quiet school where everybody knows everybody else – just as the child knows the staff, the staff knows the child. They stay very much in an atmosphere which is more like a primary school really. They stay very much in their own classroom, teachers come to them, they have their own routine. But I have seen children with Aspergers in a mainstream school, hiding in the corners, hiding behind the white board, so as to give them some protection from what's going on around them. They can't cope with it and I think that this class of child is a very, very important one because education makes a huge difference to such a child and they may grow up to lead a perfectly good, indeed, a brilliant life. They'll always have difficulty in their communication with other people but they will be able to be taught as long as they are in a suitable atmosphere. I go on about this because I think it is one of the most terrible things that I hear from the parents of children with Aspergers, how they suffer at school and how, in the end, they refuse to go to school and so huge amounts of talent are wasted and huge amounts of suffering imposed.

L.L. What do you see as leadership challenges to mainstream principals?

B.W. Of course, I think there is sometimes over optimism about children who have obvious disabilities and how well they will be catered for in a mainstream school. I'm thinking now of blind children or partially sighted children. They urgently need to be in an environment where it is easy for them to get hold of textbooks or things that they can actually use where there will be a large body of library equipment that's been adapted for Braille, or translated into Braille. That is very much easier to ensure in a big special school for the blind and I know quite a lot of blind people my age or less old but, you know, grownups anyway, who said that they really don't know how they could have got where they are today without all the support. Many of them are brilliant lawyers and members of parliament and so on. They don't know how that would have been possible for them, if they hadn't been at a special school that had all these facilities for not just

teaching Braille, which of course they need, but having things translated into Braille so they can read the same things that other children can read. To say, ‘Oh well, we can have the blind, we know how to show them around and we teach them to learn, we teach them how to make out in the seeing world’ is not good enough.

Exactly the same thing, which I think is true of deaf children, they may very well need such specialist teaching and such specialist physical environment that they can make use of every last bit of hearing that they’ve got, and be taught how to get about in the hearing world. And again I know many people who were - there’s a brilliant Grammar School over here for profoundly deaf children – the Mary Hare Grammar School – and people who’ve been there – well, it’s just that I’ve been to the school and it’s a wonderful school and it’s almost impossible to imagine the specialist equipment being transported into any mainstream school because it’s so expensive to do this. So, I think, one must be very cautious about saying for any group of children - disabled children, ‘They’ll be perfectly ok in a mainstream school with a few adaptations’. For a very clever child may well be totally frustrated if he can’t read all the things that other people read or if he can’t take part in all of the activities that his class group can take part in. One of the things that most impressed me about the Mary Hare School, for example, was the way they taught music through vibrations and there were such specialist teachers and the whole school benefited from that. Now that is just to me impossible to imagine actually in a mainstream school. So I think that every child who is found to have a disability must be assessed with these questions in mind;

> *Can he actually learn? Will he actually be able to learn? Will his learning experience be rich and useful and exciting if he is to remain in the mainstream school?*

Too often in this country (England) anyway, the child who is most disabled – intellectually disabled – it’s fair to say, is the child who gets the most inexpert teaching because what he gets is a classroom assistant who may be very well intentioned and very good but who cannot give the child what he needs and what a properly trained teacher could give. It seems to me paradoxical that in so many of our mainstream class rooms, there are a few classroom assistants desperately trying to help either the child with Aspergers or the child with emotional difficulties or the child with learning - specific learning difficulties who’s not trained to help any of those children and may indeed do more harm than good. If a child who is dyslexic with specific learning difficulties finds that even with the so called support of the classroom assistant he is not making any progress, then his mood will become despairing and, of course, he thinks he will never learn, whereas a few hours with a specialist teacher would have put him on the way to overcoming or circumventing his difficulties. And I heard the other day, for example, about a man in prison who is 41 years old and who, when he got to prison, was identified as being dyslexic, severely dyslexic. After he had been so diagnosed and had been given specialist help he said: ‘I have learnt more in 8 weeks than I learnt in the whole of my school career’ and it’s absolutely true a specialist can help but one must provide the specialist.

L.L. How do you see the future in SEN?

B.W. One of the most important things that must be tackled and I hope your new Council will tackle this, is to give the provision of special education the priority within the school that it deserves. It is very, very difficult to ensure that this is so, because the school gains glory in the outside world, if it wins matches, gains academic honours, gives wonderful concerts and so on. There is a terrific temptation for the heads of schools to spend all their available money and do everything they can to promote these wonderful activities. I was certainly, in my days as headmistress, totally guilty of spending every penny that I had to spend on the music in the school. My one aim was to bring the school up to the standards of the specialist music school, which it wasn't. Even my fellow members of the staff of the school laughed because they knew that I had spent all the money on music but they realised that this was something which actually was good for the whole school. But somebody who is promoting the education of disabled children within the school, or even demanding that they get special help from outside from specialist teachers, that person is going to find it very, very difficult to persuade the resources of the school to be directed towards those needs. Because there's no glory in it, therefore it seems to me of the greatest importance within a school that either the head himself or herself or a specialist, who is responsible for the special education of the school, should be part of the senior management team. S/he should be someone who is charismatic and bossy and can say 'we've got to have the money' for SEN. I think you do need a lot of strength of character and leadership skills in order to persuade your colleagues that this rather unglamorous part of the school is just as important as the winning of the scholarships and the winning of the gold cups.

L.L. What is your view on assessment of students in mainstream schools in order to identify SEN?

B.W. I do think that the question of how the child is assessed is of the greatest importance. My own view is that there are certain key times in the child's school career where it is absolutely urgent that the child should be seriously assessed and that ordinary classroom teachers in mainstream schools should be taught that they are instrumental in keeping a track of how the child is flourishing week by week. And these key times are obviously when the child first comes into school, reception class or whatever it's called. But then crucially, I think, in the years – the last year of primary school and the first year in secondary school – years six and seven in our parlance anyway - are absolutely important beyond words. If by the time the child is just about to leave the primary school it becomes clear that he hasn't kept up with his contemporaries, then urgent steps must be taken because that gap between primary school and secondary school is hardly ever taken seriously enough in my view. I think that for absolutely every child who is in his/her first year secondary school there ought to be continuous assessment. I think the principals of secondary schools have a huge responsibility here for ensuring that they get a report on every child and that that report, if it's in the least bit worrying, or indeed if it's exceptionally encouraging, should be passed on to the parents so that the parents have an up-to-date, week by week, blow by blow account of how the child is doing. I think only

by so doing can we be sure that children are properly assessed and that, if they have special educational needs, these are picked up on. Even special needs, such as dyslexia, may have passed unnoticed in primary school but may be picked up and may become increasingly urgent when a child gets to secondary school. We have to remember that children are very much nicer to one another when they are primary school age and haven't become adolescent and got cliquey and horrible. If there's one message that I have to give to heads of schools, it is that the first year of secondary school may be really crucial for the child, especially if his problems have been missed all the time he's in primary school. That is where I think a great deal of the educational damage is done in this country because children are allowed to drift/sink in their first year in secondary school.

L.L. Final comments to the conference delegates?

B.W. I think it's an enormously exciting moment to have this LDS/RTU conference. I hope that you feel very much strengthened in your resolve to cater for the diversity of special needs that there are, bearing in mind that different children have very different needs and that what all of them need is expertise to help them to learn. So I regard the special schools as the absolute key to this, whether in the education of children who are pupils at their school or in the education of children who are in the mainstream and nevertheless urgently need expert teaching. I think of the special schools as rather like churches that have missionaries who go out and work in the field. So I hope that one of the things that comes out of this conference is the absolute self confidence of the principals that they will have highly trained experts on their staff who will disseminate the knowledge that they have. I think it would be advisable that they be given access by the mainstream school to come in and teach the children with special needs and give firm advice about those children who are not flourishing. The whole point of this exercise is that there are a very large number of children still in the mainstream who are not flourishing. This leads to their avoiding school, to their leaving school; it leads to the despair of their parents and often to these children themselves ending up in prison. These pupils need appropriate assessment and reintegration into mainstream schools or should be catered for in special schools. I feel that there is a huge amount that the principals of special schools can do in making it absolutely clear that they are in charge of the expertise. You, the principals of special schools, need to share this expertise with mainstream schools. That's what we want.

L.L. Thank you, Baroness Warnock.

A video of the interview can be accessed at http:tinyurl.com/cam8ub
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