

Implementing a Multi-Disciplinary Approach

The Warnock Report recommended the "concentration of both health services, including therapeutic services and specialised teaching in one setting". This approach is being successfully implemented in a school for children with physical disabilities in Northern Ireland where parents are an important part of the team.

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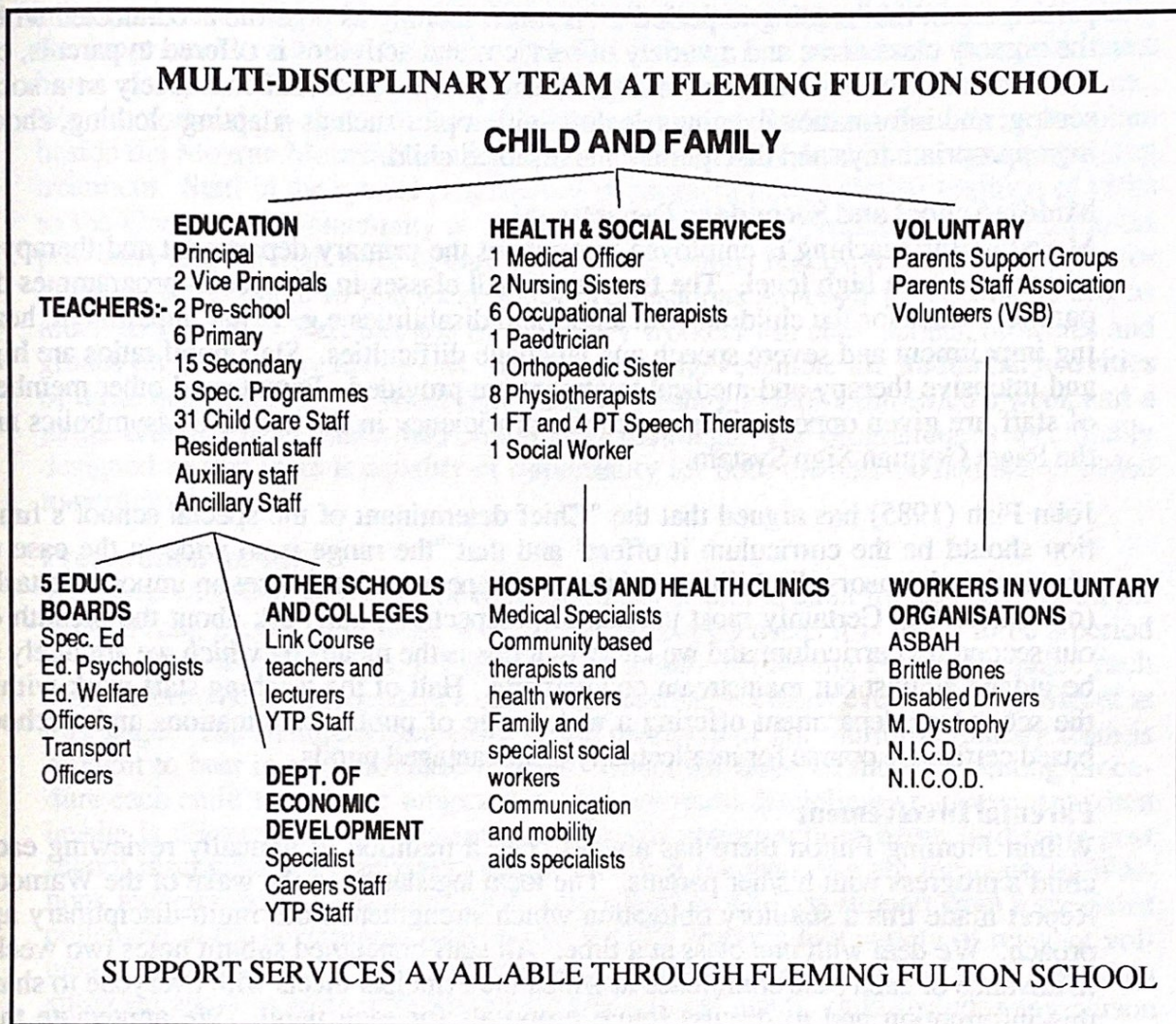
Introduction

Special Educational Policy in Northern Ireland, and other parts of the United Kingdom, has been largely determined by the Warnock Report on Special Educational Needs (1978) and subsequent local legislation (1984 and 1985). In this paper it is intended to outline the response to the professional challenges associated with this legislation and how it has in particular influenced the work at Fleming Fulton, a day and residential special school for 185 physically disabled children aged 2+ to 18+ years from all parts of Northern Ireland.

The main thrust of all the government's documents on special education in the last decade is well summarised by George Cooke, (Vice Chairman of the Warnock Report), in the following sentence "What we are talking about in terms of special need is a response to individual need with as much integration as possible and as much special help as necessary" (Cooke, 1986 p.2). However, it is difficult to find evidence of planned restructuring of special education provision based on this philosophy throughout the province in the initial post-Warnock era. On the other hand we have observed a rapidly declining school population, vacant accommodation in some schools being economically converted to suit disabled children and a few parents succeeding in persuading education boards to supply a care worker to meet some of their disabled children's needs in local schools. During the same period the proportion of multi-disabled children referred to Fleming Fulton increased gradually due to significant advances in medical practices leading to the survival of more premature babies. We were encouraged to note that Warnock felt that children with severe or complex disabilities or children with a number of disabilities would continue to benefit from provision in special schools like Fleming Fulton. Both Warnock and the legislation endorsed the multi-disciplinary team model, arguing for "concentration of both health services, including therapeutic services, and specialised teaching in one setting" (op. cit. p.216).

At the core of the statementing procedure was the synthesis of opinions drawn from parents, teachers, medics, psychologists, social service employees and other interested parties (SRO 1985 No. 365). During this period Fleming Fulton school was virtually rebuilt and its barrier free design and extensive educational and therapeutic facilities received a number of architectural awards throughout Ireland. Arguably, however, the main reason that parents have continued to send their disabled children to Fleming Ful-

ton is the amount of support our large multi-disciplinary team is able to offer. This brief paper shall concentrate on the inter-related elements of the 'in house' team outlined in the diagram below with some passing references to the other agencies upon which we call.



The Early Years

In our experience Warnock was correct to suggest that "parents as much as teachers, must see themselves as active educators, and both parents and teachers may need the help of other professionals in their endeavours" (op.cit.p5) . While physically disabled children may be referred to Fleming Fulton at any age, most first make contact through our pre-school services where we work hard at establishing open professional relationships with parents. We have produced a number of guides, *Starting Out* and *Welcome to Fleming Fulton*, which cover the most frequently asked questions regarding school organisation and services. The Toy and Book Library meets for two hours one morning a week in the warm friendly environment of our social area. Parents chat over a cup of coffee while a teacher supervises the children at play. A range of suitable toys and books is available for home loan. Parents in the throes of coming to terms with the knowledge that they have a child with a disability have often expressed their gratitude

for this forum which provides support and an opportunity to meet other parents who have come through this difficult stage in their own lives.

Parental participation is continuously fostered in our nursery department where parents meet the various professionals working with their children for the first time. Parents participate in the 'settling in period'. As much therapy as possible is conducted within the nursery class areas and a variety of services and activities is offered to parents, e.g. frequent home visits; coffee mornings where parents and staff mix freely in a social setting; and information evenings dealing with topics such as adapting clothing, choosing appropriate toys and disciplining the disabled child.

Middle School and Secondary Department

Mixed ability teaching is employed throughout the primary department and therapy is maintained on a high level. The five very small classes in the special programmes department cater for the children with additional disabilities e.g. visual impairment, hearing impairment and severe speech and language difficulties. Staff pupil ratios are high and intensive therapy and medical treatment are provided. Parents and other members of staff are given opportunities to acquire proficiency in the use of Blissymbolics and the Paget Gorman Sign System.

John Fish (1985) has argued that the "Chief determinant of the special school's function should be the curriculum it offers" and that "the range is so wide in the case of physical and sensory disabilities and the small special school is set an impossible task" (op. cit. p.70). Certainly most parents of prospective pupils ask about the breadth of our secondary curriculum and we know that this is the means by which we are likely to be judged against our mainstream counterparts. Half of the teaching staff work within the secondary department offering a wide range of public examinations and a school based certificate course for intellectually disadvantaged pupils.

Parental Involvement

Within Fleming Fulton there has always been a tradition of annually reviewing each child's progress with his/her parents. The local legislation in the wake of the Warnock Report made this a statutory obligation which strengthened our multi-disciplinary approach. We deal with one class at a time. All staff concerned submit notes two weeks in advance of each case conference at which the Principal meets with everyone to share this information and to discuss future proposals for each pupil. We appreciate that while the parents of our pupils have to contend with many 'experts' they "should have the opportunity to visit their child's school regularly and without ceremony and be able to talk to staff" (Warnock 1985, p.155). Parents meet with the Principal and a representative sample of the staff working with their children on Friday mornings to receive an account of our review and to offer their comments, suggestions or criticisms. A parents' room has been established where parents may meet individual members of staff for a private chat on the day of their child's review or at other mutually convenient times. An important member of the multi-disciplinary team on these occasions is the school based social worker who offers a confidential service to parents at school or in their homes regarding state benefits, housing matters and generally coping with complicated bureaucratic procedures. I can confirm Warnock's contention that a social worker "in sympathy with the aims and ethos of the school" will greatly facilitate "good home school links" (op. cit. p271). Since Fleming Fulton School caters for such a large geographical area it is important to have available a social worker familiar with

the needs of children with physical disabilities in order to liaise with the social services in the child's home neighbourhood.

Holiday Support and Recreation

Warnock reported that "one complaint often heard from parents, where their children are already attending school is the lack of support during school holidays, particularly the long summer holidays" (op. cit. p.160). During this period our therapists make home visits, recommend exercises and advise on suitable aids, home conversions etc. We are fortunate to have our own outdoor centre at Ballinran on the coastal plain beside the Mourne Mountains and staff take children there for holidays and continuing treatment. Staff in the special programmes department have a similar tradition of visits to the Corrymeela Community at Ballycastle. We also appreciate that with transport problems and the high level of care some of our pupils require it may not be easy for many of the children to join local youth organisations although we encourage this as much as possible. Staff assisted by voluntary workers run cubs, scouts, brownies and guides on Wednesday afternoons. The programmes resemble the traditional activities of these organisations. A youth tutor runs an evening PHAB Club twice a week and a junior club has been established on Saturday mornings. The programme is specifically designed so that there is equality of opportunity for both the able-bodied and disabled to participate.

Preparation for life

We agree with Warnock that "the transition from school to adult life can be difficult for many young people. For those with special education needs it is likely to be a period of particular stress" (op. cit. p.162). The basic aim of Fleming Fulton, to enable each child to become as independent a citizen as possible, becomes even more significant at this stage. The cumulative expertise of the members of our multi-disciplinary team is brought to bear in a co-ordinated manner. Under the terms of the statementing procedure each child's needs are subjected to a formal multi-disciplinary reassessment when he/she is thirteen years of age and we take this opportunity to begin to discuss post school placement with the young people and their parents. We are fortunate, as Warnock recommended, to have our own careers teacher who has support from a specialist colleague in the government's career service and workers in a variety of relevant voluntary organisations. The 1984 Education and Library Order made it clear that when speaking about "a child who has special educational needs, child includes any person who has not attained the age of 19 years and is in attendance at a school" (op. cit. p15). As many of our people have had illnesses and periods of hospitalisation which have disrupted their education most pupils now remain at school until they are 19. This has given us an opportunity to revise our 16+ programme. We have organised link courses with local colleges of further education, a week long college sampling course, work experience placements and assessments in workshop settings.

Economic awareness has become an integral part of our curriculum. Occupational therapists closely supervise pupils initially in local shops, then in larger shopping centres and eventually journeys to city centre stores. Pupils run a variety of school based mini companies in horticulture, clock manufacture, poultry farming and a school shop. We have also incorporated Warnock's recommendations about the importance of recreational and social activities for this age group and with the assistance of many volunteers we have a school choir and orchestra who entertain various community groups.

Everyone is engaged in a full scale musical production which played to over 2000 people last December. Staff from all departments are involved with a horse riding programme. Swimming, athletics, educational gymnastics and variations of most major games are offered by the Physical Education Staff. Throughout the young person's final year at Fleming Fulton we collaborate with "voluntary organisations and further education establishments.....to increase the opportunities available" as recommended by Warnock (op. cit. p.312). The young people and their parents attend a careers evening when all the relevant outside agencies are present. Members of the past pupils' association visit the 'leavers' to discuss how best to cope with the problems associated with entering further education colleges, employment or day care provision. The Principal serves on advisory committees in colleges making special provision for students with physical disability and the young people are encouraged to maintain their links with the school through the past pupils association or by later undertaking leader training for one of the school clubs or uniformed organisations.

Summary

This paper has endeavoured to give some impression of the high quality of service which the multi-disciplinary team at Fleming Fulton is able to offer physically disabled young people and their families. We find ourselves on the eve of a period of considerable general educational reform in Northern Ireland. The proposals will apply to all children and we must ensure that we continue to offer the young people entrusted to our care the breadth of experience their able bodied peers receive elsewhere. With the assistance of the many dedicated members of staff from all the professions at Fleming Fulton our remarkable pupils will meet all the challenges associated with a National Curriculum.

References

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