The Wales Education Lecture

2006

Thirty years on: what is special education?

Baroness Mary Warnock

Cyngor Addysgu Cyffredinol Cymru
General Teaching Council for Wales

The General Teaching Council for Wales

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On 2 October 2006, the Wales Education Lecture was delivered by Baroness Mary Warnock at the National Museum in Cardiff.

Baroness Mary Warnock

Mary Warnock, Baroness Warnock DBE, is a philosopher of morality and education.

From 1949 to 1966, she was a Fellow and tutor in philosophy at St Hugh's College, Oxford. Following this, she was Headmistress at the Oxford High School for Girls. She was Talbot Research Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall (1972–1976), and later a Senior Research Fellow at St Hugh's College, becoming an Honorary Fellow of the College in 1985. She then became Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge, and in 2000, she was a visiting professor of rhetoric at Gresham College, London.

From 1979 to 1985, she advised the UK committee on animal experiments and chaired an inquiry into human fertilisation from 1982 to 1984. She was created a life peer in 1985 as Baroness Warnock, of Weeke in the City of Winchester.

Baroness Warnock has also been a member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), and chair of the UK committee on special education. She is credited as being the 'architect of England's special needs system', and has recently become one of its most outspoken critics.

Thirty Years On: What is Special Education?

It seems to me manifestly obvious that the time has come to hold a thorough investigation of the provision of special education. I do not see how it is possible for the Government to dismiss the findings of the Cross-party report published in July this year, which had carefully examined evidence on how the system was currently working, and produced a damning condemnation of the system. Without going deeply into the causes of the failure or the presuppositions about special needs that lay behind it, the committee found that the system was simply not working. The policy with regard to closing special schools is unclear and inconsistent; the process of awarding children statements of special need is deeply flawed; the training of mainstream teachers who are supposed to identify and manage the education of children with special needs is wholly inadequate.

In many schools, the policy of meeting special needs is given scant priority in the overall planning of the provision the school makes for its pupils. In short, the committee concluded that the framework within which special education is to be provided has run its course, and should be dismantled. It seems impossible that anyone should be satisfied with the response of the Minister, that now is not the right time for a completely new look. What could better define the 'right time' than the freshly uncovered evidence of present inconsistencies and growing discontents? Here in Wales, especially, with your comparative freedom to innovate, you have rightly decided that now may be the time for radical change.

One of the major difficulties in addressing future policy, whether here or in England and Wales as a whole, in the field of Special Education, is one of vocabulary. Until the early 1970s, special education had been education in special schools, for all those

so-called 'handicapped' children, divided into different categories of disability, who were deemed to be educable. The most severely mentally disabled were excluded from education altogether. This meant that any child who attended a special school was supposed to be suffering from some specified disabling condition, epilepsy, for example, or a sensory impairment, or mobility problems or, most commonly, mental subnormality, moderate or severe, or maladjustment. Each disability was theoretically supposed to be separate, as measles is separate from whooping cough. It would be just bad luck if your child had both at the same time. Teachers knew perfectly well that this was not an accurate picture; but it was the official one, largely as a result of the origins of special schools, often founded by charities especially concerned with the deaf or the crippled.

You will notice that while the first three of those disabilities I mentioned were medically diagnosable conditions, the last three were not. Even at this stage the Medical Model was inadequate. A doctor could tell a parent that her child was epileptic or deaf. It was not for him to tell her that her child was mentally subnormal, still less maladjusted. In any case, special schools already had a bad name. Your child was 'labelled', as they used to say, if he attended one. He was definitely 'not quite right'. And then, after 1972, following the Education Act of 1970, these schools had somehow to adapt themselves to accommodate the most severely disabled children, hitherto deemed ineducable, suffering from complex and multiple disabilities; and the concept of children who attended special school as a race apart was reinforced.

It was a large part of the intention of the Committee of Inquiry whose report was published in 1978 and of which I was the chairman, to rescue such children from their exile, and allow them to be recognized as members of the ordinary population of school children. This did not mean that all the children in special schools should be brought forthwith into mainstream schools. We wanted rather to widen the scope of the concept of special education. We argued that, while only about 2% of the

school population attended special schools, the evidence of teachers showed that the percentage of the whole school population needing some additional help if they were to make progress was nearer to 20%. The extra 18% were already in mainstream schools, though probably struggling to keep their heads above water. It was from this that the concept of special educational needs was born. The crucial thing was that children's needs should be met, not where they were to be educated.

I still think that this was an enlightened idea, and that it had a good effect on parents with children who were disabled and on the children themselves. They were now to be included in one overarching educational plan. The effect ought to have spread to the special schools themselves, so that it could become more acceptable, and no longer a stigma, to attend a special school. But, alas, this did not happen. There were several reasons for this. First, as I have said, special schools now had to accommodate the most severely disabled children, children who used heartlessly often to be referred to as 'vegetables' or 'cabbages', whose disabilities no-one could deny. Through the marvellous work of such specialists as Professor Peter Mittler, we now began to learn what a huge difference education could make to these children, even if their progress seemed infinitely slow and modest compared with the rest. But no education, however devoted, would ever allow them to take their place in the community unaided, earn their living or enjoy a normal way of life. Parents whose children had lesser disabilities were reluctant to let them go to schools which also accommodated these severely damaged children. And here I should like to put in a cautionary word. We must not forget, in our enthusiasm for some form of 'normalisation' or inclusion of the disabled child, that the severely disabled still exist, and indeed that their numbers are increasing, as more extremely premature babies are kept alive, of whom it is true that the less their birth weight, the greater their risk of irreversible brain-damage.

While our committee was sitting, in the 1970s, we were constantly told of the wonders of the Norwegian system of Integration. Every school, we heard, accepted all local children, whatever their abilities or disabilities. That was where they all belonged. When we went to Norway to see for ourselves, it took me some time to notice that, though it was true that every classroom had its share of Downs Syndrome children, or others who for various reasons were slow learners, we never saw a really severely disabled child. When I asked how this could be, there was an embarrassed silence, and at last someone said that they were at hospital schools. When I pressed to see such a school, I was told that, since our visit was taking place under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, not of Health, we could not go into any hospital. I have always thought of this incident as a warning. No child, whatever his disabilities, should be quietly written out of the educational script in order to preserve an ideal of Integration.

The second reason why special schools retained their poor image was broadly political. In the 1970s, and not exclusively among Labour voters, but certainly among them, and especially their academic and intellectual wing, there was a strong feeling that education had failed in this country. For example, when James Callaghan was Prime Minister, he inaugurated the so-called Great Debate which, starting in 1977, threw open the nature and content of the school curriculum to the general public. (Thus, it was claimed, throwing open a door to what had hitherto been a Secret Garden).

More than ten years before, Anthony Crosland, Labour Minister of Education from 1965 until 1967, had determined to bring grammar schools to an end, and with them the eleven-plus examination, on the basis that what he called the weak theory of equality of opportunity, the ladder system of education, was intrinsically inequitable, and would perpetuate and increase the gap between the rich and the poor. (His ideas, first published in the periodical *Encounter* as early as 1962, were astonishingly

persuasive, and indeed may still be heard today among those who deplore Blair's apparently fixed determination to dismantle the comprehensive schools). In any case, there was a widespread belief that the ideal of comprehensive education had never been given a proper chance to succeed and that society's ills would be cured only if it were embraced and expanded. A truly comprehensive system would not be achieved, the ideal not sincerely adopted, unless there were only one kind of Neighbourhood School, a school for everyone, whatever their abilities or disabilities. This involved the integration of the so-called 'handicapped' with the rest.

In the discussions of the Committee of Inquiry which began in 1974 there was, as well as pragmatic arguments about how the educational needs of children in mainstream schools could be discovered and how they could best be met, a discernible thread of left-wing ideology. I remember one impassioned former Chairman of the NUT declaring that schools would never be truly comprehensive until all special schools had been closed. We did not collectively go as far as this: and of course, there remained unresolved, as in the world of education generally, the embarrassing problem of independent schools, of which no-one could really afford to suggest abolition. Nevertheless, the stigma attaching to special schools was not merely that the children who attended them were treated as pariahs, but that the institutions themselves were politically incorrect. And Government Ministers of both parties have tended to reinforce this view of special schools, by constantly defending them in highly patronising language. Special schools, they say, have a place: they are necessary for those children with complex and multiple disabilities with which a normal school cannot be expected to cope (as you might defend the existence of Broadmoor or any other prison for the criminally insane by saying that ordinary prisons could not handle such inmates.)

And now the rise of the Disability Rights lobby has added to the unpopularity of special schools. There are those who are prepared to argue that the segregation

of children with disabilities of whatever degree of severity into special schools is a form of apartheid, and no more defensible. It is not only to education that, since 1970, every child has a right, but to education in a mainstream school. The vociferous claims of the disability and human rights groups are perhaps partly to blame for the Government's shyness about clarifying its policy on special schools.

So where are we to go from here? We may look with some admiration at the path that has been taken in Scotland, where the framework of provision has indeed been dismantled, at least as far as vocabulary goes. Since the 2004 Education Act in Scotland, the term 'Special Educational Needs' is no longer to be used. The Scottish equivalent of the Statement, the Record of Needs (a far better title, if the aim was to reveal what the statement was supposed to be, when it was first introduced) has been abolished. Instead, children are presumed to attend mainstream schools, and are sent to special schools (according to the 2000 Education Act) only if they are unsuitable for mainstream education or will disrupt the education of others in a mainstream school, or if keeping them in the mainstream will be unduly expensive. These provios are in line with the 1981 and subsequent Education Acts in England, and are equally open to various interpretations. However, since now every child is assessed on entering school in order to ascertain whether he has need of Additional Support, the concept of mainstream or 'normal' school is itself becoming unclear. Mainstream school is increasingly simply 'school' and there is nothing unusual about Additional Support. It is what is referred to in the English White Paper of October 2005 as 'tailored support', intended to be available for any child, whatever the cause of his 'falling behind', as the English White Paper euphemistically puts it.

So I return to the matter of nomenclature. It is too early, perhaps, to tell whether the new Scottish law is proving financially viable. Does every child really qualify for Additional Support if he shows signs, even temporarily, of needing it? My guess is that most of such support would be help given informally by ordinary teachers in

their free time. This has always been given by good teachers in good schools, but is less likely to be forthcoming in schools where teachers are run off their feet by administration and sheer pressure of work and have little time to get to know their pupils. The best 'tailored support' imaginable used to be given voluntarily by an old Maths teacher, in my Headmistress days, who used to walk round the playing field in the lunch break or after school with a pupil who had missed a crucial lesson through illness, or who, right from primary school, had never learned her multiplication tables. If such extra help, as I should prefer to call it, became formalized, then the pupils who received it would immediately become a category or kind of pupil, not 'SEN', perhaps, but 'ASN'. And with the best will in the world, 'ASN' would acquire the meaning that 'SEN' had before it; it would be the name for a particular category of pupil.

For we need some way of referring to those pupils with whom the 1981 Act, and the 1978 Report of the Committee of Inquiry was concerned. There is a constant tension between our desire not to refer to them at all, because they are no different from the rest and do not form a class apart, and to pride ourselves on identifying them and dealing with their problems in the best possible way, even giving them statutory rights under the Disability Discrimination Act. And the worst danger of using a term such as 'SEN' or 'ASN', or any other that the wit of man might devise, is that we fall into the trap of supposing that all pupils so designated can be regarded as the same: all can be 'included' in the mainstream school. This tension can be traced back to our original report, and to the thinking within the Department of Education that was influential on that report. As I have said, we were anxious to escape from the medical model of Educational Handicap, where the pupils in question were divided up according what was wrong with them, and, in our efforts to concentrate rather on what they could achieve if their needs were met, created the very danger we are now faced with. That all children with needs of any sort would be thought of as somehow an identifiable class of children, predominantly within the mainstream.

But of course, this was never a realistic way to think. I have referred already to the way it came to be assumed by Government and theorists that one could separate off the most severely and multiply disabled for special placement, either in the dread special schools or in 'units' within the mainstream (I shall come on to 'units' in a moment). But the rest could be lumped together likewise, on the other side of a conceptual divide, as SEN in the mainstream. Different mainstream schools differ from each other in the accommodation they can make for slow learners who need more time than the rest; for dyslexic or other pupils with specific learning difficulties; for children with health problems such as asthma or epilepsy; for wheelchair-bound pupils, or those with communication problems.

Above all, there is a huge difference between accommodating such pupils in primary school from how one is to integrate them in secondary schools, a difference often overlooked in the battles about special schools. But there are some young people at secondary school in particular who, in my opinion, can never flourish in a large mainstream comprehensive school, or indeed any other large school, whether an Academy, a Trust school or any other. It is these young people, many of them having suffered from repeated failures in mainstream schools, or coming from chronically unstable backgrounds, being perhaps 'looked-after' children, or otherwise fragile, some of them diagnosed as being mildly autistic or Aspergers children…it is these children for whom, in my opinion, a small school is an essential educational and emotional requisite. It is these children who are being treated with actual cruelty, if they are forced to attend mainstream school in the sacred name of Inclusion.

The question of how such fragile children should be educated, how Special their education should be, is therefore not just an educational, but a moral problem, for you in Wales, for us in England and for them in Scotland. It is my own belief that the best solution is that they should be educated in special schools, small, well-equipped and with a high ratio of teachers to pupils, such as is to be found in the best private special

schools. This solution, even if ideologically acceptable to Local Authorities, is manifestly an expensive option. It will be rejected often on the grounds that it is unaffordable, even if this financial objection is disguised as an ideological commitment to Inclusion.

One response to the financial objection is that the policy of inclusion itself is very expensive. If proper support is provided, it will often entail what is virtually a personal tutor for the disabled child, someone who can be with him all the time, whom he can learn to trust and who understands him. Or, if it is his behaviour that is erratic, there must be someone who can lead him away and calm him and enable him to return to his work. The purpose of such support must be to allow the child to learn; and in an alien and hostile environment such as a large school is likely to provide, the support will not be easy to find or to afford. An hour or so a week of a classroom support teacher's time is simply not going to be enough. And if the support is inadequate, then the chances are high that the child will be excluded from a school that finds his irrational and demanding behaviour impossible to manage, if the needs and interests of the other pupils and the teachers are to be given due consideration. Exclusion is, in one sense, the most expensive option of all. For the child's future education is likely to be more expensive and more difficult to provide; and if it is not successful, then the child may become a permanent charge on the social or prison services. This, however, is too global and long-term a view to appeal much to Local Education Authorities, strapped for money in their own budget here and now.

Another popular solution is the establishing of special units within mainstream schools. This has been common practice since the 1970s, and I remember visiting many such units in Oxfordshire while I was a member of the county Education Authority and thereafter. Some of these units formed an integral part of the school, children coming in and out either for special lessons or to take part in activities such as art and craft when they felt inclined, while other children spent all their day there. This seems a satisfactory way of including children with disabilities in the

mainstream, and it is usually hailed as socially, as well as educationally, desirable. In some cases, however, as in the case of units for severely autistic children or for the profoundly deaf, there is little connection between the unit and the main school, social advantages are hard to discern, and it is doubtful whether they can be seen to fulfil the spirit of the demand for inclusion. Moreover, such units (or indeed any units) are in danger of being always of lower priority than the main school, and having to fight for resources on a very unequal field.

A different solution, in my view more promising, is the co-location of special school and mainstream school. There are great enthusiasts for this among local authorities, and I am going to visit a new special school built in accordance with this principle next week. However, co-location, that is the presence of two or more schools on the same campus, may be variously interpreted. The most important thing to emphasise, in my view, is that the schools should be genuinely separate institutions with each its own governors and headteacher and, if it is a Trust school, control over its own budget. For otherwise it will suffer the same fate as a Unit within a school is subject to. Its needs will always be subordinated to those of the 'main school', whose place in the league tables or in the County sports competitions may be put in jeopardy if the special school is accorded genuinely equal rights to the resources available to the campus as a whole.

There may well be benefits to both schools from co-location. For example, if the mainstream school has, as it should, a number of pupils whose special needs include health-care needs, pupils, for example, with asthma or epilepsy or diabetes, these pupils may have access to a school nurse, sadly not always available in mainstream schools. And there will be teachers on the campus with expertise that they can share in the field of disability. But it is also widely claimed that co-location has social benefits for the pupils themselves, in that the pupils from the two schools can share some activities, such as sports and drama, or, at the very least, can get used to each

other and become friendly in the grounds and in the bus to and from school. And this benefit may be enhanced if there are siblings, one in one school and another in the other. This is a possible outcome, and I do not wish to deny it, if evidence can be brought of its likelihood.

On the other hand, I would not wish this alleged social benefit to be a major part of the argument for co-location. I do not myself much like the idea of disabled children being used as a kind of tool to teach tolerance and acceptance among other children. And as far as true collaborations and friendships go, I am doubtful how much they will occur. Individually and between siblings and their friends it may well happen. But I doubt whether the idea of the disabled children joining in as equals with sporting dramatic or musical events is realistic. They will, after all, retain, many of them, their difficulties with social contacts, their ineptitudes and their occasionally bizarre behaviour. As soon as the spirit of competition enters the sport, the play-production or the concert, the disabled are unlikely to be included in the team or the cast or the string-quartet or jazz band. But I could be proved wrong. I need only evidence.

But there is a more fundamental point (and I apologise if I seem to press this point in season and out of season). It is often argued that if we aim at a society that is accepting and inclusive, we must have schools that are equally so. Schools, it is argued, must be a preparation for life after school, and if in society at large we want the disabled to have as far as possible equality with the rest, this must be reflected in schools. I do not believe this. I do not think that school is a microcosm of society. It is a unique environment, with one single overriding purpose, that its pupils should be enabled to learn. It does not consist of adults, each pursuing his own end, and encouraged to allow others to lead their own lives in peace. Rather, it is a community devoted to one purpose only, which is to learn, and to grow up with the skills and knowledge required for the bigger world outside. All considerations should be subordinated to the one end, of providing an environment for pupils where learning

is possible. If this means, for some, a relatively segregated community, in which, for example, being blind, a pupil is taught Braille, is taught how to use his other senses to compensate for his lack of sight, and above all is taught by specialists to have confidence in his own abilities as a blind person, then this is far more important than any superficial ideal of inclusion. He will feel himself included in the enterprise of learning, within his own school world, an enterprise that knows no barriers, and he will gain security and confidence thereby.

And so I finally come to what seems to me perhaps the best way forward for special education, certainly a way that should be properly explored. In the Government White Paper published in October 2005, and cumbersomely entitled *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All, More Choice for Parents and Pupils*, in paragraphs 4.19 and 4.20, two kinds of school are mentioned. The first are so-called 'Trail-blazer' schools. At the time of the publication of the White Paper there were twelve such schools, otherwise known as Specialist Special schools. Each concentrates on a particular disability or group of disabilities: cognitive, behavioural, autistic and so on. This in itself is a welcome move from the lumping together of all SEN children as of one kind. They not only educate children with these disabilities who are lucky enough to live in their catchment area, but also send out teachers to 'share their expertise', presumably with the mainstream teachers and classroom assistants who are called on to accommodate pupils with these disabilities in their own schools. It was proposed that the number of these schools should rise to 59 in the next two years.

But, even more important, in my view, there were at the time of the White Paper, already 30 special schools of a different kind known as specialist non-mainstream schools. These are all former special schools that sought permission to take on a particular specialism as all mainstream schools may. Other schools, those in the mainstream, have to show a certain level of success in their GCSE results before they may be allowed to apply for such status. This criterion was presumably dropped for

the special schools applying. All applications are subject to raising some initial capital from parents or other sponsors. They will then receive extra government funding to enhance their facilities and employ extra staff relevant to their speciality. So they can become, let us say, a school specializing in IT or in Music or in Drama, but because they are special schools at heart, no one can attend unless he has a statement of special educational need, or satisfies whatever criterion replaces the statement. And again because historically they are special schools, they are small, perhaps no larger than 500 pupils, and with a very favourable staff-pupil ratio. There is plenty of built-in tailored support. It is proposed that there should be at least 50 such schools by 2008 and special schools will be encouraged to apply for such status. It is this policy that perhaps justifies the claim of Lord Adonis when he appeared before the all-party select committee of the House of Commons that the government had no plan to close special schools. And the encouragement of such schools cannot but seem like an acknowledgement that special schools should no longer be regarded as the dump for the hopeless, or the last resort for a child who is barely educable.

I don't know if there are any such schools in Wales. I hope that there are. Their very title, 'specialist school', may make them more acceptable, fit to exist alongside mainstream schools, perhaps sharing facilities, at least out of school hours. In the one school of this kind that I know, a specialist IT school, but seeking other specialisms as well, many people, school children and adults, use the IT facilities, but it is they who are by courtesy allowed into the school, not the pupils who are kindly 'included' in the mainstream. This is in fact one of the best schools I have ever been to. And I regard it as a beacon; a ray of hope in what is otherwise a bleak scene of failure and predominant dogma.