

Special Educational Needs: an alternative look.

*(A Response to Warnock M. 2005: Special /Educational Needs - A New
Look)*

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The contentious nature of the question of inclusive education is reinforced by the recent pamphlet by Baroness Warnock (2005) in which the author provides a retrospective overview of particular aspects of the development of the Warnock Report (1978) and what she now believes are some of the damaging impacts of the outcome of the Report. This includes the position and function of statementing. A particular issue of consideration is the question of the position and future of special segregated provision. The title of the pamphlet claims that the content of the account is a 'new look'.

In trying to understand the claims of the author, we are left with the overwhelming feeling that this document is a mixture of important historical insights, but also a reflection of naivety, arrogance and ignorance on the part of the author. How have we come to this conclusion?

It is now over 25 years since the publication of the Warnock Report and in that time an extensive amount of research, writing and developments have taken place with regard to the question of inclusive education in terms of its meaning, application and future challenges, both in relation to policy

and practice. This work is based on the importance of self-critical reflection and the necessity of recognising the dangers of both complacency and arrogance on the part of the advocates of inclusive education.

In a document that claims to be offering a ‘new look’, one would expect some careful discussion of the ideas of those who represent an alternative perspective. Instead, we have no discussion of a serious nature with regard to such published material. This is particularly offensive when we recognise the central role that disabled people and their organisations have played in the struggle for inclusion. Not one serious reference is made to the extensive publications by disabled people supporting inclusive education such as, **The Campaign To End Segregated Education by the year 2020, (Alliance For Inclusive Education (2004))** and the clear demands that disabled people have outlined with regard to their approach. Such voices are excluded from consideration. This does raise the question of whose voice is seen as significant and on what grounds? The position is made clear, in that we are informed that this is the voice of an expert, “a prominent figure in education”. Nor is it any comfort to be told that those advocating inclusive education, and this we assume includes disabled people, have gone too far in their struggles for change, but that their efforts “springs from hearts in the right place: a commitment to equal opportunities” (p40). This statement is rather trivial and patronising.

It is possible to interpret the absence of engagement with significant publications of advocates of inclusion, particularly disabled activists, scholars and organisations in several ways. The most generous would be to suggest that Warnock did not feel that this was important given the nature of the publication and its intention to capture a wide media attention. However, it could also be that she is unaware of such material, having not been involved in the sustained study of the field for the past 20 odd years, or even more serious, that whilst aware of such literature, she did not think it was important enough to even offer a brief reference to some of it.

On what grounds does Warnock support her criticisms? What constitutes the evidence to legitimate the demands “for a radical view”? (p12). It takes various forms. Firstly, the claim is that what is offered is “a new look”, but when we examine the statements more carefully, especially with regard to inclusion, it can hardly be constituted ‘new’. Critics of ‘full inclusion’ and advocates of special segregated provision have argued such ideas before. We are offered several unsubstantiated claims and assertions including: “There is increasing evidence that the ideal of inclusion... is not working” (p35). That inclusion “can be carried too far” and it involves “a simplistic ideal” (p14). Particular support is derived from a conversation with a psychiatrist (p45) and Warnock’s experience of the work of a school for ‘pupils with moderate learning difficulties’ which she unreservedly claims that, “This successful special school seems to be a

model that could be followed by others...” (p48). These accounts are thus being elevated, on the status of author, to a position of unquestionable significance. But there are other stories to tell. For example, that of a large special school in a Northern town which we visited this year, that has a strategic plan to work itself out of existence within ten years. Now what is important here is that no single experience or example should be used to justify a general comprehensive theory or approach.

Whilst we agree with Warnock that education also includes being “directed towards the future, towards life after school” (p41) we would clearly disagree over the place in which this is to be taught and experienced and the role of education in the development of that future, especially if it must be inclusive and non-discriminatory. Our fundamental disagreement is best illustrated in the naive and politically reactionary demand “...that governments must come to recognise that even if inclusion is an ideal for society in general, it may not always be an ideal for school” (p43). This form of thinking if realised in practice will contribute to the building up of serious individual and socially divisive problems for the future.

One of the features of an inclusive approach is to question existing categories and language including, the validity of the discourse of ‘special needs’ and ‘special educational needs’ which the authors of the Index For Inclusion (2002), for example, endeavour to do. Part of the reasoning for such a critical approach is that this language contains the unacceptable

assumptions that legitimate and maintain existing exclusionary, discriminatory policies and practices. We thus welcome Warnock's statement that there is a need for "rethinking the concept of special educational needs" (p28). However, the paper is replete with the non-problematical use of such language and very worryingly, the terminology that supports a medical model approach. For example, the use of "fragile children", "suffering from learning disabilities" (p49) and the unquestioning use of the label 'autistic spectrum disorders' (p45).

Many encouraging and effective developments have taken place with regard to inclusive policy and practice. However, Warnock seems to exaggerate the extent of these achievements in order to support her general argument. Advocates of inclusion are very aware of the contradictory and competing policy context in which inclusion is located. This has led to the lack of political will on the part of government to unreservedly support inclusion and as Rustemier and Vaughan (2005) maintain, in England there are:

...wide variations in practice in spite of all LEAs responding to the same legislation covering the education and placement of disabled pupils (summary).

The barriers to inclusion are stubborn and multi-varied and it is important to recognise the distinction between laudable rhetoric and actual practice.

Exaggeration and unqualified assertions are a style of presentation that encourages moral panic.

One of the most problematic statements the Warnock makes concerns her claim that “the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report, (was) the concept of inclusion (formally known as integration)” (p22). The lack of recognition of the significant differences in the antecedents and meaning of such concepts arises from the confusion in her thinking that inclusion is about specifically categorised individuals or special needs. Inclusion as Frederick (2005) so importantly confirms “...also means tackling racism, homophobia and bullying. It’s a whole school issue...” (p19) and as such, is concerned with challenging all forms of discrimination and exclusion. It is about the well-being of **all** children.

Finally, and a further example of the questionable nature of her understanding and intentions is the recommendation for “... a government-funded independent Committee of Inquiry into the current state of special education...” (p54). No time or money should be given to this. Instead, more thought and resources must be given to providing mainstream schools with the necessary support to enable them to continue with the struggle of working towards inclusive cultures and practices and meeting the entitlements of **all** learners. Given the demands of this challenge, the development of more multi-agency engagements is called for.

Whilst not wishing to give Warnock's views a prominence they do not deserve, I have nevertheless been encouraged to offer this brief alternative look.

Reference

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