

# Progress has been made on special needs provision



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COLUMNIST



➤ Special needs teaching has made amazing progress in recent years

**T**HE Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 clearly stated, "the child that is hungry must be fed, the child that is sick must be nursed, the child that is backward must be helped, the delinquent child must be reclaimed and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succoured." There was a clear desire that education should be 'inclusive'.

As a new teacher in 1966 the terms 'backward children' and 'educationally sub-normal' were in common use. The 1944 Education Act clearly stated that the responsibility for such children lay with the Local Education Authority. In my school, there was no particular strategy for children who had 'special educational needs'. The 11 plus maths and English examination was considered enough to identify the needs of children. As for severely mentally disabled children, for many people at the time, they were not deemed educable at all.

Seven years later in 1973 Margaret Thatcher, the then Education Secretary in Ted Heath's Conservative government, announced that she proposed to appoint a committee of enquiry with Mary Warnock, an Oxford Fellow and Headmistress of Oxford High School for Girls as Chair.

The committee was to review the educational provision for children and young people 'handicapped by disabilities of body or mind, taking account of the medical aspects of their needs, together with arrangements to prepare them for entry into employment; to consider the most effective use of resources for those purposes; and to make recommendations'.

The committee held its first meetings in September 1974, supported by four sub-committees. In 1975, I attended one of the sub-committees. Those of us who were there felt we were part of a very significant and radical development.

In 1977, the Committee of Inquiry into the 'Education of Handicapped Children and Young People' published its report. The report was to change radically the educational picture for children with disabilities.

Most of the recommendations

became enshrined in the Education Act 1981.

The report introduced the term 'special educational need' to identify any child needing extra or different support, and argued that 20 per cent of children have special needs at least for some part of their educational career.

The report recommended that segregated 'special' schools should be for those with the most complex and multiple disabilities which were long-term, and that mainstream schools should develop to meet the needs of all other children.

Where the child was placed, in special school or within mainstream school, there should be an agreement with the parent. To help facilitate the integration of children the Report recommended an expansion in special needs advisory and support services. With the aim of protecting the educational needs of the most severely disabled and ensuring they received appropriate resources to make progress, the Report recommended statements of special needs.

These statements were to be issued by local authorities to individual children only after a five-stage assessment process had been followed. Once issued, the local authority had a statutory duty to make the provision listed on the statement.

In 1982, on my appointment to a new school, the special needs children were not even integrated into the school itself. The first thing I did was to move the department right into the centre of the school. This was more than a symbolic statement; it also allowed the children to have easier access to the school library and resource centre.

Following my involvement, though limited, in the Warnock Review, my school decided to take the concept of integration between mainstream education and specialist school provision a little further. We joined with the North Counties School for the Deaf in a programme called 'Project Respond'.

The children with higher-level special needs joined classes within school and were required to follow a

'normal timetable'. Most of the children had multi-disabilities, including being blind, deaf and in wheelchairs. Some were also autistic and had other health issues.

One key element of the project was to take a group of children for a weekend to Keswick. None of the children had special needs. They were then divided into groups. One group wore invisible earphones, which played white noise. Some children wore dark glasses, which reduced their vision by 100%. Others were asked to use wheelchairs. All were required to maintain these restrictions for the whole weekend.

Many of the children considered it was one of the most intense and valuable learning experiences they had ever taken part in. The difficulties and, sadly, the abuse they encountered were shocking to my children.

At the end of Project Respond, we took a mixed party of our own children and children from the Northern Counties School for the Deaf to see the Moscow State Circus. The Russian Clown noticed some of the children using sign language and 'signed' to them in British Sign Language. They then proceeded to communicate across the circus ring. This was one of the most emotionally charged moments in my life in education. As teachers, we learn so much from our pupils.

Many years later in 2008 Warnock described the system she helped to create as 'needlessly bureaucratic' and called for the establishment of a new enquiry to ensure children with special educational needs are not 'the victims of institutional pessimism'. This is a challenge none of us should ignore.

When I walk into a special school or a specialist provision within a school, I am humbled by the level of commitment and expertise of the staff. I never find 'institutional pessimism'. I also see teachers teach, and children achieve, in ways which are truly astounding. Even though there is still so much to do, we have moved a long way from my early days in teaching.

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