



Interview with Baroness Mary Warnock DBE FBA

- 1. What factors led to your change in stance in relation to the integration of children with autism into mainstream educational settings?*

There really was no U-turn at all to which you refer. For one thing I wrote about the folly of complete inclusion as early as 1991. But even in the original 1978 report we never advocated integration for all children with special educational needs; we were rather saying that already in the mainstream sector there was a fair proportion of varied abilities and we certainly were not advocating the abolition of special schools. I knew that there were some members of the Committee who started off by wanting that and thinking it was a sort of natural logical extension of the comprehensive system but they were very much outnumbered by those who thought that we essentially needed to keep special schools and use them as Centres of Excellence just as is now being suggested by Government and was so by the last Government. So there was no U-turn and of course the press loves a U-turn so a great deal was made of this but I do wish to put an end to that bit of mythology if possible.

- 2. Given the current economic conditions, how feasible is your advocacy of autism specific schools?*

Well of course it makes every educational consideration more difficult and less likely to change radically for the better but I think that the present bill that is now just about to come to the House of Lords, the new Children and Families Bill, does make it absolutely clear that Special

Schools are not being phased out but are to be used as teaching schools for other teachers and that of course includes schools that specialise in autism.

3. *How can we ensure the empowerment of children and young people with autism to maximise their potential?*

Well the reality is that the autistic spectrum covers children with very varied different abilities. To maximise their potential it does depend very much on the school that they go to devoting themselves to preparing them for adult life and I think that many good autistic schools for autistic children do just that. I mean they teach them slowly and with difficulty the social skills that they need for taking part in ordinary adult surroundings so I think that a great deal depends on the school and the further education colleges as these young people go on to college after they leave school.

4. *Can an Autism Act legislate for ALL children and young people with autism?*

I think it is very difficult to answer that. The trouble is that the difference between the severely autistic and children who are diagnosed with Asperger's is so enormous although they are related, the difference between the two ends of the spectrum is so huge that I think there is a danger in lumping them all together just as there is a danger with lumping all children with special educational needs together; it is like their needs are the same. For children with Asperger's it seems to me that the social setting in which they are, and the social support that they need, is paramount. And actually as you well know they can be taught to tolerate things which they don't easily tolerate, they can up to a point overcome their difficulties, whereas for children and young people at the other end of the scale there are huge difficulties in helping them overcome their difficulties. There are difficulties in helping them to tolerate breaks in routine that kind of thing. So they couldn't really flourish in the same sort of environment, from the same sort of teaching, in my opinion.

5. Is there a place for a flexible child-centred curriculum in our schools?

Yes of course, I think that this applies not only to autistic children but to other children with particular disabilities and disadvantages. For example it applies very much to children who have long term illnesses who often may not survive much beyond childhood and it seems to me that for those children they must have a flexible curriculum. There is no good forcing them to do things they don't enjoy doing or can't do. So I think every child who is identified as needing special support under our new system or within this year should at least have access to a curriculum that is adaptable and flexible and they should be allowed to do what a skilled teacher could see they would flourish in doing.

6. How can Teacher Training Colleges better prepare their students to meet the needs of ALL of the children in their classrooms?

I am a believer in a good deal of teacher training being in school and with very good mentors and trainers so to speak working in the school and then if a teacher learns in a classroom, being taught in a classroom herself, how to identify children who are in difficulties and if that teacher wants to specialise then she must go and learn in a special school. I think that the emphasis on training within schools is rather a very good one because in the old days, teacher training was so very abstract and an awful lot of stuff about the history of education and philosophy of education which really wasn't particularly useful. Obviously people could pursue the subject if they are interested in history or philosophy but if they want to know about teaching then the best place to learn is in a school with an experienced teacher at your elbow. So I very much welcome the emphasis on in-school training and among that training will be training in how to observe and monitor the progress of children so as to pick up those who are not flourishing.

7. You have spent your career campaigning for a place within education for children with special educational needs; do you have a message for parents of children with autism?

Just not to despair. It is a very difficult message to get across especially now but I think that your Centre, the cross border nature of it is a wonderful thing and ought to give people hope. Presumably you can answer difficulties and requests. I think in England people can make full use of the National Autistic Society. The trouble is parents find it so difficult to get their voice heard and the knowledge of their own child taken seriously. I think that one of the worst things is to see schools still thinking that they have done all they can once they have acquired a teaching assistant. I hope that the new legislation in England with every single assessment carried out by someone who is independent will make it easier for parents to get their voices heard. So that is my message they must go on shouting loud to get themselves heard.

8. Middletown Centre for Autism's first series of Research Bulletins is recognised as a valuable resource for autism professionals due to their accessible format and current focus. How can the Centre in your opinion develop this important research tool to impact a wider audience?

Creative use of your website is the starting point. Presumably all teachers have access to the internet and I think this is the best form of dissemination of information. But I do think also that a great deal is done and can be done in this kind of area by organising conferences. I know it is fairly expensive but there is something uniquely good about parents and teachers meeting together and not feeling isolated and being able to talk to people who understand what their problems are. I think the conference is still, although considered old fashioned, still a very useful tool in the way of sharing information.

9. *What would the Warnock Report of 2013 recommend differently in terms of provision for children and young people with autism?*

Oh an enormous amount of difference. We didn't know about autism at all in the 70's, it was still very little understood and certainly in relation to the more able end of the spectrum of autistic children, then Asperger's didn't exist in the public mind at all. Things have changed enormously: there is much more knowledge, much more recognition, much more understanding of what autistic children need socially as well as strictly educationally. The most important thing for autistic people, young or old, is to establish some form of viable contact with other people, perhaps even utilising the internet as an educational tool if possible. I think things have changed very greatly since then. I remember going to one of the first autistic units, it was just outside Oxford. The methodology of teaching was very primitive in the 70's so I think today we can make recommendations from a much better knowledge base now than we could back then. It is because of initiatives like the Middletown Centre that the knowledge and understanding has so greatly improved. I think it is wonderful what has been done by you and the National Autistic Society; I think you and they have done wonderful work.