

## Research in Special Education Forty Years After Warnock – Same Old Story?

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It is difficult to interpret the frame of mind in which Jack Tizard, then Professor at the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the London Institute of Education must have been when he wrote his piece on Research in Special Education in *Special Education Forward Trends*. At times it is possible to discern an element of optimism, though this generally infused with a healthy dose of realism, but one almost senses an element of frustration at the lack of understanding of the potential value which research might have in education as a whole.

Much of Tizard's article is devoted to explaining what the Warnock Report had to say about research in the area of special education, and whilst he is critical of the chapter on research, describing this as "one of the weakest and most conventional" sections, he perceived that Warnock had seen the potential for moving a research agenda forward. Although he bemoans the lack of any suggestion that education should become a "research based profession" in the manner of medicine, he does celebrate the fact that the report identifies a number of key actions to be taken to secure a better understanding of the value of formal inquiry for the acquisition of new knowledge to influence practice. Tizard makes number of important suggestions in respect to how Warnock's agenda for research might be delivered. These are built around the report's three major proposals, these being focused on (i) the co-ordination of research in special education, (ii) areas in which research is needed and (iii) the translation of research into practice. Inevitably writing so soon after the Report was published Tizard could only speculate on how these three would be addressed. Colleagues who have been working in this field in the years since Tizard wrote this article are well placed to pass judgement on whether the recommendations made in the report have been achieved.

A full review of the developments in special education research made during these intervening years and a critical consideration of the current state of affairs, would require significantly more space than has been afforded me in this brief article. However, in accordance with the tenor of the arguments put forward by Professor Tizard I will make a brief commentary on one point from each of Warnock's three areas for research development. To "co-ordinate and stimulate research", the Committee proposed the establishment of a *Special Education Research Group* (SERG) which would have representatives drawn from the Department for Education, leading National Children's Groups and members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (interestingly it did not propose membership from academic research bodies). This was envisaged as a powerful body with a significant budget enabling the commissioning of high quality research to inform policy and practice. Tizard welcomed this proposal and saw it as a significant step towards ensuring that educational provision and practices would be well informed through research providing reliable data and informed evaluation. Such a body would have authority and would ensure that future developments in special education would be based upon sound principles and research endorsed practices. Whilst over the past forty years we have seen many attempts to create an organisational structure that would encompass such a group, these have rarely gained the support of national policy makers and today there is little confidence amongst the teaching profession in the ability of the Department for Education to understand and

utilise research. If we look at jurisdictions elsewhere it is apparent that the value of organisations focused upon the funding and evaluation of research into special and inclusive education has been recognised and endorsed. As an example we may take the *National Council for Special Education* in Ireland, which not only commissions and evaluates research but has also made effective use of this for the development of policy and the support of teachers in classrooms. There may be valuable lessons to be learned here, but possibly only by those prepared to look at other European models.

In identifying 13 areas in which research was seen to be needed, Warnock provided a useful starting point for those seeking to have an immediate impact. It is in these areas of research need that we can undoubtedly find some cause for celebration. The expansion of literature in the area of special and inclusive education, including the launch of a number of well-respected academic journals has presented opportunities for the dissemination of findings from research and to engage in dialogue with colleagues both at home and internationally. However, any perusal of these journals will reveal that much of the research is small in scale and that there have been too few efforts made to co-ordinate investigations and thereby to build larger data sets. There are, of course exceptions and it is important to remember that often small scale studies have local impact, even at school level, which effects positive change. Reading through Warnock's list of 13 research priorities it is possible to find studies that have made efforts to address the questions which the committee posed. It is also recognisable that many of these critical areas, such as education for children for whom English is an additional language and provision in isolated areas are still seen as being in need of further investigation.

The relationship between teachers and researchers to ensure translation of findings into practice is an area close to my heart. Warnock believed that partnerships in this area would be essential if research was to have impact, a belief fully endorsed by Tizard. In the years since Warnock we have seen a growth in post-graduate programmes, which have provided opportunities for teachers to gain insights into the research process. In some instances we have witnessed well established partnerships between schools and university departments of education. However, I still detect reluctance on the part of some researchers to acknowledge that if we truly wish to see education as a research based profession, then we must be fully committed to working with teachers in setting the research agenda, involving them in the process and sharing in accessible dissemination of results. This last point is probably more important now than at any time since Warnock as we see university departments of education being driven by a utilitarian agenda with courses increasingly delivered by professionals who are neither research active or engaged.

Early in his article Jack Tizard states that "Warnock draws upon research and the committee itself commissioned a number of inquiries. Indeed, its most significant statement, embodying a conviction which informs the whole of this report, is one which it acknowledges to be firmly based in research findings". Sadly I suspect that if today's government commissioned such a report it would not be placed in the hands of as eminent an academic as Lady Warnock, who certainly falls into the category of an "intellectual elite" so readily discarded in recent years. Neither would it be likely that they would expect the outcomes of any such report to be built upon a foundation of empirical research.

Having revisited the *Warnock Report* and read Professor Tizard's article several times I think I now understand the frame of mind in which he wrote this piece. In this, as in all his writing Jack Tizard

was a realist. At the time he stated that a weakness of the way in which educational research was used by policy makers and politicians, was that it was seen simply as a means of validating issues on which they had already made up their minds. Whilst we should applaud the endeavours of the countless researchers and teachers who still seek for greater knowledge and understanding I fear that Tizard's view remains prescient.