

Editorial

As we project our sights on new horizons in special education in Ireland, we look forward to the Education White Paper whose publication is promised for the Autumn of this year.

If anything has emerged out of the national debate in recent years, it is that special education is not just an addendum to the general system. Its place is at the heart and conscience of that process whereby we decide what is worthy of transmission to all our young people by way of values. Will special needs issues such as minority rights, individual learning styles, enlightened attitudes, curriculum quality, and whole-school appraisal infuse and inform future policy and legislation in Irish education? It is not so long ago (1972, to be exact) since a Minister for Education said: "There is nothing of such a complicated nature in our policy that would demand an elaborate White Paper to explain it." Our present Minister, launching the Report of the National Education Convention last January, announced that her projected White Paper "will allow us to change, because the world is changing." Special Education must be an active agent in this process of change - not a sideline spectator.

To what degree has the Report of the Special Education Review Committee promoted this process of change? Has it challenged our thinking on the place of special education in the wider world of general education? Has it enriched the process of educational discourse in Ireland by inviting honest reappraisal of concepts, structures and ideas? On the face of it, the seven principles outlined in the introduction to the Report would appear to sketch a philosophical foundation for the rationale underlying all that is to follow. It is dissappointingly clear, however, that these principles are intended only as "basic guidelines for the future development of the system." There is no serious examination or analysis of the system itself. The Report avoids the complexities of philosophical discourse contenting itself with an inventory approach focused on resource provision. The result is a product that is service-centred rather than client-centred. This is hardly surprising when one considers that no people with disabilities were invited to be part of the Committee.

The Report, as a "blueprint" for service provision overhaul, may fall short of what the concerns of teachers, parents and, above all, the children themselves, require and deserve. But it is a beginning. It is the first comprehensive report on special education in this country. We must ensure that it will not be the last. Our work, as we focus on new horizons, is only beginning.

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