

Editorial

Examples of pioneering care and education for children with handicaps in Ireland can be pointed to over the last hundred years or more arising out of philanthropic or religious effort and enterprise. Such early foundations as the Dominican sisters' school for the deaf at Cabra in Dublin and Stewart's Hospital in Palmerstown happily continue to challenge and enhance special educational service today. Nevertheless, educational provision in this country for children with special needs, in terms of state interest and investment, is a very recent development.

Thirty years ago, the Congress of the Irish National Teachers Organisation passed a resolution asking "the Department of Education to arrange for special facilities in schools dealing with the retarded child" (*Quarterly Bulletin*, Dublin: INTO, no. 108 April, 1959). Addressing the delegates the President reiterated the arguments the Organisation had made over the years "to floodlight the problem of retardation". For disciples of progress, such as the late Sean Brosnahan, these would seem to have been frustrating years when he had reason to state "the Department of Education does not recognise the existence of the Handicapped Child" (quoted by Eamonn O Murchú in an unpublished paper). Even Chief Inspector Tomás O Cuilleánáin had to admit that the establishment of the special committee in 1948 to review the education of the blind would seem to have been "the first occasion in which the Department gave official recognition to the special needs of handicapped children" (*Oideas*, 1, 1 p.5-15).

Things have come a long way since then. Indeed the decade of 1955-65 was particularly notable for its achievements through enlightened and innovative co-operation between voluntary and statutory bodies. Of particular significance was the establishment of the Special Education Diploma Course in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra in 1963 and its continued legacy of in-service enrichment to teachers. Today, the challenge to be far-seeing in a time of economic stringency has never been more vital with the implications of the Single European Act. The Department of Education's participation in a European special education review project is outlined in this issue (Lavin). Integration of all children, whatever their level of educational need, may be a European aspiration, however implementing and resourcing these measures is another matter (McGee). Here we can learn from the efforts of our European partners as to how the challenge of de-categorising special educational structure is being met in the Netherlands (den Boer) and how traditional remedial teaching has evolved into whole-school learning support systems in Scotland (Blythman). Parental involvement and the right of all children to have access to the full scope of the National Curriculum have recently been given legal status in Northern Ireland (Manning) with the considerable challenge that this imposes.

The First National Conference of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education with its theme "**Special Education - Current Developments and Future Trends**" will it is hoped, make a significant contribution to enlarging our professional outlook, informing debate, encouraging co-operative effort and preparing us for change in the time ahead. A selection of papers from the Conference will be published in future issues of REACH Journal.

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Editor.