

## EDITORIAL

The human stature of a people can best be measured by the quality of care given to its most needy members.

Ireland, we are told, has a worthy ancestral record where this is concerned. The Brehon laws of the Middle Ages protected the dignity, freedom and rights of people with mental handicap and other disabilities. A distinction between mental illness and intellectual impairment was also recognised.

Our contemporary experience however, gives us less cause for congratulation. An Irish study of five years ago (McConkey, R. and McCormack, R.(1983) *Breaking Barriers: Educating People About Disabilities*. London: Souvenir Press) found that nearly half of the respondents in a survey considered the terms "mental handicap" and "mental illness" interchangeable. Despite high-tech advances and increased environmental awareness, access to many places and services is still thoughtlessly denied to persons with restricted mobility. Socially disadvantaged and traveller children suffer stigmas born out of ignorance or prejudice.

Changing public attitudes to people with special needs demands that we as teachers and care professionals develop a conscious community dimension to our work and take on a wider responsibility as educators. Welcoming and facilitating local interest and involvement in our schools, centres and special units needs careful planning and serious commitment to achieve success. It is a challenge but it can be done (Kelly).

This issue of REACH has a decided community/parental/family orientation in its articles. The often overlooked resourcefulness and competence of brothers and sisters of children with special needs to contribute meaningfully to their siblings educational development in association with the school, is emphasised in a project report (Fleming). Community awareness and involvement in the pioneering work of teaching children with severe and profound handicaps was achieved in Sligo through utilising the talents of the local VEC woodwork class to construct specialist materials (Foley). The possibilities of a community truly recognising, enhancing and celebrating the life and work of its disabled members with dignity and enduring commitment are described in the example of the L'Arche Community Movement (O'Sullivan).

While schools need to examine their aims in the light of such aspirations, the issue of parental partnership in the education process requires special recognition and debate (Ní Thiarnaigh). Such matters along with other crucial questions will have a concentrated forum in the forthcoming Conference on "**Special Education - Current Developments & Future Trends**" which will be held in St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin from June 15 - 17, 1989.

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Editor