

N.A.T.S.E. — Where From? Where To?

The National Association of Teachers in Special Education is now twenty years in existence however much has changed in the world of special education in this period of time. Have these changes been sufficiently reflected in our association?

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When the NATSE was formed in 1968/69 it responded to a strong demand from teachers in special education at the time to provide a forum for the collective articulation of the teachers' concerns, aims and aspirations about the future direction of special education in Ireland.

From then until the late 1970s the NATSE made a positive contribution to all major innovations in special education in cooperation with organisations like the INTO (whose president used to be president of NATSE) and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra where first a group of teachers on the Special Education Diploma Course took the initial steps to form the association. It is worthy of note that the close affiliation between the association and the college was reflected in the fact that during those first years the President of St. Patrick's College was also Patron of NATSE.

Much has happened over the last twenty years to change for the better special educational services for our pupils, and all associated with such endeavours — including NATSE — should be justifiably proud.

We now enter a new era and it is timely that NATSE before it comes of age, should launch its new journal. The journal will provoke comment, discussion and constructive criticism as well as facilitating the first aim of our association — “the dissemination of information and knowledge to all teachers, and particularly those in the field of special education in Ireland.”

Current membership of NATSE is however in the region of a mere 200. Can NATSE then claim to be representing the collective views of all teachers in special education — those working in special schools, special classes and mainstream schools? Is there a danger that the journal might well continue to perpetuate our insularity and remoteness from mainstream education? These questions need to be addressed if NATSE is to resume its dynamic, positive position that it held in the educational milieu here during the 1960s and 1970s.

The cautionary opinion is not intended to be a negative comment on our association rather it is a challenge to us to face realities and plan accordingly.

The first reality is that the concept of special education has changed radically from the time the NATSE was founded in 1968/69. It can no longer be regarded as a segregated separate system of education for pupils with special educational needs but rather as an integral element of mainstream education. Moreover the direction of special education is moving away from separate school provision and towards community mainstream provision. If we accept that reality (even though we may have reservations about it) NATSE should open its membership to *all* teachers. Are not all teachers engaged in special education? Such a development would bring fresh vigour, challenge and debate to our association and would give those of us working in special schools an opportunity to work more closely with our colleagues in mainstream schools.

A second reality is that NATSE cannot survive on its own. On its own it can only stultify, wither and die. Is it not time to revitalise the warm, cordial and harmonious working relationships we have had in the past with organisations like the INTO PSI, ARTI etc.? It is also time to forge new links with groups like RAI, ESAI etc. Should we not also renew our friendship and contact with our honorary members here in the Republic, Northern Ireland and further afield? Such members were and can still be a rich source of inspiration for us as we enter a new era.

A third reality is that as an association we are not the vocal public voice we used to be. When last did we as an association make a public statement about matters affecting special education? Nothing will disaffect members more than what might be perceived as a passive association.

A fourth reality is that some of the aims expressed in our constitution – for example, the promotion of research and experimental projects in the field of special education – need to be seriously addressed. The need to encourage teacher research and teacher exchange is critical at the present time and could provide exciting opportunities for members who wish to contribute to their own professional development and to the enrichment of all involved with children with special educational needs.

I would also suggest that we seriously consider how we might involve parents to a greater degree in our work. We did on one occasion invite them to be active participants in one of our seminars and it was a most fruitful venture. Teachers in special education have always blazed a trail in developing positive parent-teacher attitudes and it is one of the main reasons why our special schools are so successful. Let us go one step further and offer them associated membership of our association.

This journal represents I hope, the beginning of a new era for NATSE. It is the responsibility of each and every member to the development of the association. I trust that this contribution will be accepted in the spirit it is given – as a series of signposts pointing to a road that is uphill but beyond which are new, challenging and exciting horizons.