

Guest Editorial

Mrs. Mary-Helen Martens was the National President of the Australian Association of Special Education from 1985 until March 1988. In her term as President, Mrs. Martens brought to the role a professionalism and dedication which encouraged and inspired those who worked with her. Although Mrs. Martens was then succeeded as President by Mrs. Heather Martin of N.S.W., her leadership is not lost to the Association: she will continue to work with the committee which is establishing the A.A.S.E. Australian Disability Achievement Foundation. In the Editorial, Mrs. Martens shares her vision of the special educator's role in a rapidly changing educational environment.

Don Rice
Editor

The Special Educator

The theme of the Twelfth National Conference of the Australian Association of Special Education, *Change - The Continuing Challenge* encouraged us to focus on the changes occurring in education in the '80's and the particular challenges confronting special educators. We were presented with a myriad of opinions, some of which are contained in this issue of the Journal and deserve your thoughtful consideration.

For my part, I would like to share with you my thoughts regarding the special educator as a professional and my perceptions of the challenges which face the profession of special education.

Special education is about commitment, dedication, innovation and competence. There are no instant rewards in the world of special education and it most certainly is not a field for the faint-hearted. Complacency and mediocrity in special education cannot exist. Today the special educator is required to be an advocate, a planner, a researcher, a teacher, a team member, an influencer and a confidant. The role of the special educator has changed in the last two decades to the extent that we are now faced with the questions "Who is the special educator?" and "What is our vision of special education?". As special educators we are concerned with the potential and the growth of the human person. It is our commitment to the development of that person which is part of our vision and which presents us with our challenge.

To contemplate one's philosophical perspective and orientation to the profession of special education must be the most basic and necessary step that we need to take. Special education is enormously complex and it is not concerned purely with the technical competence of its educators. It is my belief that our failure to acknowledge education as an art has led to a despondency and stress that is unnecessary. As special educators we have allowed ourselves to become totally engulfed and enmeshed in the jargon, forms and expectations, real or imagined, which we perceive are placed upon us. We have rarely taken the time to reflect on the humanistic, philosophical aspects of our work.

Philosophy

There are many educators who no longer derive pleasure from their work because they have no clear philosophy relating to their art and little respect for themselves as true professionals who are engaged in a challenging, worthwhile and exciting endeavour. The joy, excitement and stimulation which can be an integral part of special education should be the most positive reinforcer that we as professionals can have. It is imperative that special educators develop strong self-perceptions and that we understand and appreciate our primary role in the overall educational process of students with special needs. Asking the why, can lead us on a journey of discovery which can serve to enlighten, stimulate and excite us. Our vision may be rewarded and we can confidently face the challenges and changes which are ahead of us.

One challenge which faces special educators is to gain consensus regarding sound, philosophical and theoretical principles. We must look towards the acceptance of principles and policies which encourage innovative and flexible practices. There must not be a reluctance to change. We need to remember that many of the established practices of today were the radical notions of another time. It is essential that we look to approaches which will stimulate the learning and development of the individual student with special needs. We must become supportive of each other and establish a collegiality within our profession. Our two Associations have the ability to support all special educators in their endeavours. This support could well be in the area of research, the development of appropriate practices, the communication of formal views and advice and in the provision of forums which encourage the professional development of the special educator.

Research

Special education in Australia and New Zealand is still inadequate in the production and utilisation of research findings. It is vital that we develop solutions which are relevant, perhaps unique, to

the Australian and New Zealand scenes. Research will be essential if we are to accumulate knowledge that is unique and situation-specific; knowledge that will give us guidance regarding effective practice; knowledge that will legitimise our diagnostic procedures, and which will highlight our successful solutions and our successful practices.

The acquisition of new knowledge is exciting and intellectually stimulating, thus the potency of research would serve to revitalize and stimulate special education. If special educators are to take up the challenge of change they must ensure that research is rational and deliberate. Methodology must be based on sound, respected and well documented procedures. The challenge is there for us all, to ensure that special education in Australia and New Zealand develops sound, well researched, effective practices.

Technological Advances

Perhaps the most exciting development in special education in the last decade has been the increasing role of technology in solving particular problems in educating students with special needs. The greatest challenge for special educators is to adapt and change in order to acquire the knowledge and the skills necessary to use this technology effectively with their students.

It is clear that microcomputers can assist students with special education needs to develop new skills and thus become more involved in their own learning processes. Whilst computers are not a panacea they do have the potential to facilitate learning for all students. Special educators must not fall into the trap of using the computer as a substitute for outdated teaching practices. Computers must be used effectively if they are to provide special education students with the opportunities to explore concepts in stimulating and failure-free environments. It is widely recognised that children can learn to use computers in a masterful way and that learning to use computers can change the way in which they would learn everything else. It is essential however, to remember that the teacher will always be the critical instructional variable. The computer is a machine, and its instructional value is only as good as the quality of software and the quality of teacher support that is provided.

A challenge for special educators is to ensure that the software they are using is appropriate and allows the student to interact directly and totally with their environment. The special educator must feel confident and competent in selecting appropriate software and facilitating the structured learning which allows for an extension of the curriculum.

A new world has been opened up for students with special educational needs because of rapid technological advances. Many physical barriers to learning have been overcome as a result of the

technological developments of the past few years and it is impossible to predict the developments which are likely to occur in the future. However, one thing is certain: The majority of students with special education needs are going to be assisted in some way over the next decade as a result of technological developments.

Special Educators' Professionalism

As special educators, it is essential that we acknowledge our professionalism, and stand proud in recognising each others' achievements. To do this we have to change our perception of ourselves - to change our image. It is imperative that organisations such as the Australian Association of Special Education and the New Zealand Special Education Association encourage and promote the professional identity of special educators. It is the responsibility of the Associations to empower their members by creating opportunities for professional interchange and mutual support. It is part of these Associations' responsibilities to strive to ensure active participation from all members by providing opportunities for involvement and opportunities for growth in knowledge, skills and attitudes. At the same time, however, it is the responsibility of all special educators to become involved in their own empowerment, and in their own professional development. This can only occur when, as special educators, we acknowledge our professionalism and accept the resulting responsibilities.

To grow as a profession we need to be clear in our philosophy of special education, our policies, and our aims. Our practices must be based on sound principles and include appropriate, innovative and challenging strategies. They must, above all else, be relevant to the needs of those children and adults whom we represent. It is vital that we utilise the technology and resources available to us in the most effective and powerful way. We must be prepared to share our successes with our colleagues, to document and to conduct research if effective change is to occur.

The Australian Association of Special Education and the New Zealand Special Education Association provide the most appropriate forums for all people involved in special education to meet and communicate as professional groups which share a common vision and commitment. The sharing of our vision with our colleagues surely will lead to exciting, dynamic and innovative changes in our field - the challenge is there for us all.

(Mrs) Mary-Helen Martens

National President: AASE 1985-1988