The Legacy of Professor John Coolahan

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(by Áine Hyland)

The death of John Coolahan on 3rd June 2018 marked the end of an era in Irish education and in the arts in Ireland. John was a well-known figure in Irish education and arts circles for over 50 years. He played a major part in influencing Irish education policy – both as an "insider" and an "outsider" - and was actively engaged in various arts initiatives over the decades.

John was born in Tarbert, Co. Kerry on 9th June 1941. He attended the local national and secondary schools, and in a memoir written shortly before his death, he gave credit to St. Ita's lay Catholic Secondary School in Tarbert and to its founder and principal, Jane Agnes McKenna, for his lifelong interest in literary, cultural and educational matters. Following his graduation as a national school teacher from St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra in 1961, where he was awarded the Gold Medal for coming first in the graduating class, he taught for four years as a national school teacher while studying in UCD for a B.A., M.A. and H.Dip. He then became a secondary teacher and subsequently read for a Ph.D. and M.Ed in Trinity College Dublin.

He was appointed Lecturer in Education in Carysfort College in 1971, where he remained until 1974, playing a key role in drafting the new three year B.Ed programme which was first awarded in 1977. The background papers and draft B.Ed. curriculum which are still extant from that period show that he was the key author of the new B.Ed., which was adopted in all of the colleges of education recognised by the National University of Ireland. The documentation provides evidence of a programme which was based on sound philosophical principles which would prepare the national teachers of the future to teach the Department of Education's 1971 "New Curriculum" – an *avant-garde* child-centred curriculum which placed Ireland among the vanguard of educationally progressive European countries at that time.

In 1974, John was appointed College Lecturer in UCD and in 1986, he was appointed Statutory Lecturer. The following year he was appointed Professor of Education and Head of the Education Department in the National University of Ireland Maynooth (now Maynooth University) – a post he held until his retirement in 2004.

His formal academic positions were only one aspect of his enormous and ongoing contribution to education, nationally and internationally. He was exceptionally generous in his willingness to give talks and keynote addresses to a wide variety of groups and associations – from local parent associations, Teacher Centres, Summer Schools and various educational associations to major international conferences and specialised policy audiences. His hundreds of talks and presentations throughout the decades included keynote addresses to teacher unions, managerial bodies, the Reading Association of Ireland, the National Parents Council and the Educational Studies Association of Ireland – to name but a few. At an

international level, he spoke at conferences and seminars all over the world, including Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and South Africa. Through his work with the OECD and the European Commission, he was a key influencer of educational policy in numerous jurisdictions. He carried out no fewer than ten reviews of national education systems on behalf of the OECD in countries as diverse as the Russian Federation, Chile and the Dominican Republic. He undertook consultancy work for the World Bank and the Council of Europe and he served as Vice-President of the European Commission's Consultative Group on Education.

He willingly accepted onerous and demanding roles on a wide variety of government-appointed groups and committees. Politics played no part in his appointments, in that the various Irish Ministers for Education who appointed him were from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. In the 1990s, he wrote the background report for an OECD review of Irish education, which focused specifically on teacher education. This background report was accepted almost verbatim by the OECD team, to the chagrin of Department of Education officials, who had planned to carry out a cull of university Education Departments – as they had done with the closure of Carysfort College some years previously!

In 1990, he was invited to write a Green Paper on Education – which while not initially accepted by government, was to have a decisive influence on Irish education in subsequent years. His acceptance of an invitation from Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach and Secretary General Don Thornhill in 1993 to chair the National Education Convention was a turning point in the history of Irish education. No longer would bi-lateral negotiations between Church and State about educational policy be carried out behind closed doors – the National Education Convention was the beginning of a transparent open approach to educational policy-making to which multiple partners could contribute. To quote John himself: "*The National Education convention was a landmark event in the shaping of educational policy in modern Ireland and its impact was to be very far-reaching and long-lasting".*

A year later, he chaired the Roundtable meetings on the Regionalisation of Education - which focused on the potential role and functions of Regional Education Authorities, which the government of the time had planned to set up. In the event, those authorities were never set up, but the discussions which Johnny chaired in 1993 and 1994 ultimately led to the White Paper on Education and the landmark Education Act of 1998 – the first comprehensive Irish education act.

In the subsequent decades, at the invitation of successive Ministers, John contributed to a strategy for Lifelong Learning, to the drafting of the Universities Act of 1998 and to the report of the Steering Committee on the Establishment of a Teaching Council. In 1998 he chaired the National Forum on Early Childhood Education. He is currently best remembered for his chairing of a National Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector which reported in 2011 – a report which has had a major influence on government policy on the patronage of primary schools – although its recommendations have yet to be fully realised.

Throughout his long career, John wrote more than 120 articles and five books. His magnum opus *Irish Education: History and Structure,* first published in 1980, was and continues to be a basic text-book for all teacher education students. He was co-editor with this author and a number of others, of a review of the Irish school system *Towards a Better Future* published by the National Association of Principals and Deputy-Principals in March 2017, only a few weeks before he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour – the tumour which took his life a year later. However, the diagnosis spurred him on to an extraordinary spurt of creative energy during the final months of his life, when he delivered on everything he had committed to – talks, lectures, keynote addresses and publications – even when prolonged periods of engagement were no longer easy for him and his speech and mobility had begun to deteriorate. But his intellectual and mental capacity were unaffected, and some of his finest writings were completed during this period.

John's generosity was boundless. His chairing of various boards, committees, conventions and fora, were all carried out on a *pro bono* basis, as were the countless talks and keynote addresses which he gave. He was incomparably unselfish in his willingness to help and advise his friends, students and colleagues – nothing was too much for him and no request was ever refused. This author is one of many of many who owe an enormous debt to him for his wise and sagacious advice. He advised and mentored me in the late 1970s as I researched and wrote up my own Ph.D. He invited me to act as a tutor in Carysfort College when he was a part-time lecturer there. He encouraged me to apply for the professorship in UCC in 1993 and he was invariably supportive and helpful to me throughout my academic career.

John's legacy is all-encompassing. He was passionately committed to the provision of a world-class teacher education system for primary and post-primary teachers - initial, induction and in-service. He played a major role in bringing the Teaching Council to fruition in the early 2000s, after decades of vacillation on the part of successive governments. He was instrumental in convincing the Department that teacher education could continue to be provided in all the universities, and ensured that the high calibre of Irish teachers was maintained at a time when teaching became a low-status profession in many other parts of the world. He contributed generously to north-south education initiatives and was a founder and ongoing member of SCOTENS. He was a pioneer in educational research – he set up the Educational Studies Association of Ireland in the late 1970s and never missed the annual conference – he attended the 2018 conference in UCD only weeks before his death. His report on Early Childhood Education contributed in no small way to the decision (belatedly) by the State to fund initially one year of pre-school education and more recently two years. In short, there was no area of education in Ireland to which Professor John Coolahan did not contribute during his long and incredibly fruitful life. He will be sorely missed in the world of education and the arts.

Ni bheidh a leithéid ann arís. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.