

# John Coolahan

The adage that ‘the welfare of a nation depends upon the education of its children’ has been attributed variously to John Locke, Rousseau, and the nineteenth-century educational philanthropist Vere Foster. The essence of the axiom however has been modelled in the career of John Coolahan, Ireland’s foremost educationalist.

John’s relationship with what is now Dublin City University began in 1959, when he received the ‘call to training’ at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra. ‘Teacher training’ was the order of the day, but there the idealistic Kerryman, became immersed in student-life, at a time when the College and ‘teacher-education’ was undergoing rapid reform. The capital city offered exposure to art, music and the theatre, but more significantly, John thrived amid the camaraderie of his colleagues in that celebrated ‘Class of 1961’. John flourished in that lively group, which he would now recognise as a ‘learning community’. His classmates, George Cunningham, John Quinn, and Billy Colfer, became life-long friends and distinguished contributors across a broad cultural canvas, in poetry, history and the arts. Further studies took him to University College Dublin, where he completed a Master’s dissertation on the Elizabethan poet Christopher Marlowe, and on to Trinity College Dublin for a Doctorate in Education.

Contemporary educators, refer to the ‘continuum of life-long education’, from early-years, to primary, secondary, third level, and beyond. John Coolahan taught across the complete spectrum, spending ten years at primary and secondary level, before commencing a career in teacher-education, first at Carysfort College, and subsequently at UCD and Maynooth where he retired as Professor of Education in 2004.

‘Retirement’ is a word never to be associated with John Coolahan, whose career has been characterised by prodigious energy, extraordinary productivity, unending wonder, and an irrepressible enthusiasm for his enduring passions, history and education. It was the marriage of the two which gives his work its distinctive character, as reflected by the insights and perspective of his five monographs and over 120 scholarly essays. His first volume, *Irish Education: its History and Structure* (1981) became the definitive survey of its subject, to be surpassed only by his most recent publication, *Towards an Era of Lifelong Learning; a history of Irish Education 1800-2015* (2017). This title reflects not merely system change, but a philosophical shift from an historic focus on competency and attainment, to the contemporary prioritisation of freedom, personal development, and human fulfilment.

Coolahan played a hero’s role in the orchestration of that transformation, not merely in Ireland, north and south, but internationally, within the European Union, and in a dozen country reviews conducted for the OECD. At home, he contributed, as an *Irish Times* profile put it, as the ‘principal mover in every major piece of education legislation ... [of] the last four decades’ (6 Oct 2009). Significantly, his appeal crossed party lines and to each challenge he brought wide experience, a broad mind, and an impish personal warmth. Serving on a succession of commissions and reviews, his influence shaped the 1995 White Paper, ‘Charting our Education Future’, the subsequent Education Act (1998), and the associated legislation which created the range of

institutions, including the National Education Psychology Service (1999), National Education Welfare Board (2000), and the Education Training Boards (2013) which support our schools. More recently, as chairman and rapporteur for the ‘National Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism’, he led a national reflection towards the resolution of the apparently intractable, but essential, reordering of educational provision in the State.

Writing in this city, John Henry Newman likened education without spirit, and the personal influence of the teacher, to an ‘Arctic winter’. In Coolahan’s philosophy, too, creativity is at the heart of the enterprise. In the 1970s, together with Ciaran Benson, Seamus O’Tuama and Seamus Heaney, he drafted for the Arts Council a report on Arts in Irish Education; a seminal document which fostered subsequent innovations, including the foundation of Dublin’s celebrated ‘Ark’ (1995), where children explore music, theatre, art, and film. In later years he chaired the ‘Charter on Arts in Irish Education’ implementation group, and contributed to the Creative Ireland Programme (2017-22).

Convinced, too, of the intimate association between the calibre of the teaching profession and the quality of schooling, John Coolahan championed ‘the teacher’ throughout his career. His focus was never merely on the skills and competencies needed to teach well, but on the formation of teachers as persons and professionals. This commitment was recognised in the award, by the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (2017), of an Honorary ‘President’s Medal’, the first and only time such an honour was bestowed. Coolahan inspired generations of teachers in his own lectures. He supported the profession by the establishment of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland, and made an immeasurable contribution to education on this island as the co-founder of the ‘Standing Conference for Teacher Education North and South’ (SCOTENS, 2000), which remains amongst the most successful cross-border collaborations. He was influential, too, in the creation of the Teaching Council (2001), a landmark development in the professionalization of teaching in Ireland.

Most recently, John was appointed Chair of the Governing Body of his *alma mater*, St Patrick’s College, by the Archbishop of Dublin. In that capacity, he steered the incorporation of the College, together with the Mater Dei Institute of Education and the Church of Ireland College of Education, into Dublin City University in 2016. Such an integration, unprecedented in the history of higher education in Ireland, benefited greatly from John’s immense wisdom and warmth, but especially from his ability to frame a vision which inspired colleagues across the four diverse institutions. That Incorporation achieved what John had advocated for, for almost half a century, the first faculty of Education within an Irish university, affording unprecedented capacity and scale to the enterprise of teacher education and research. That achievement was celebrated by Taoiseach Enda Kenny as ‘the largest reconfiguration of education provision in the history of the State ... [and] herald of a new era for education in Ireland.’

A Uachtaráin, I ask you to confer on John Coolahan the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (*Honoris Causa*).

